

# lautē, lautē!

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*ukikumo shinrei kitan novel translation*

## VOLUME 2 – THE WAY OF THE DEMON SWORD

the way of the crossroads killer ([translation notes](#))

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prologue

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It was a dark night –

Thick clouds covered the moon. Without the light of the lanterns, it would have been impossible to see one's feet.

Hagiwara lori was rushing home, as if she were running from the darkness.

'You act so tough, but you're still afraid of the roads at night?'

Her brother, Shintarou, made fun of her as he walked beside her with a lantern.

'I am not afraid,' lori said indignantly, which made Shintarou's face light up with a bright smile that did not match the darkness around them.

'You couldn't even go to the toilet by yourself before. You'd always cry about how you were afraid of ghosts.'

Though that was true, that was when lori had been a young child.

'I'm not a child any longer.'

'Ah, true. The truly frightening ones aren't ghosts but humans,' said Shintarou meaningfully.

lori agreed with that. Now that the black ships[1] had come to Uraga, there was much fuss about expelling the barbarians.

That wasn't all. lori had heard that there was a crossroads killer[2] – somebody testing their new swords on passersby – on the road by the Tama river that they were walking now.

'We must not let our guards down.'

'You're right. However, if we're up against a human being, there's nothing to worry about if you're here, lori,' said Shintarou with a shrug.

'Please protect your own body yourself. I will have my hands full just trying to run away in this outfit.'

It was true that lori practised the sword, but currently, she was in a woman's kimono and had no weapon on her. It was impossible for her to move freely.

Furthermore, with Shintarou being the eldest son of a samurai family, saying that he would get his younger sister to protect him wasn't a joke anybody could laugh at.

'Come to mention it...'

Shintarou stopped mid-sentence and halted.

'Is something the matter?' Iori asked.

Shintarou looked around, as if he had noticed something.

'I thought I heard somebody's voice just now...' muttered Shintarou.

'Somebody's voice?'

Iori tried to listen harder.

All she heard was silence. No voice reached her ears. Just as she was about to tell Shintarou that perhaps he was mistaken, a shriek – 'Gyaa!' – reverberated in her ears.

Iori and Shintarou looked at each other.

That shriek was no laughing matter. Iori and Shintarou nodded at each other and then ran towards the source of the shriek.

They reached a house at a crossroads and stopped without thinking –

There was a man lying face-up in training clothing there.

'Did something happen? Please stay with us!'

Iori rushed over to the man's side.

There was a wide cut on his left shoulder and a frightening amount of blood was gushing out, forming black pools on the ground.

His face was pale and his lips were turning purple. However, he was still breathing.

Iori took out a hand towel and tried to block the man's injury, but the blood wouldn't stop.

'A crossro... kill...'

The man said that in a hoarse voice and groaned. Then, he stopped moving.

In the commotion, a young man and woman stuck their heads out from the door of the house.

'What happened?' the man asked.

He had a rugged body and a height that made you look up at him, but his way of speaking was restless.

'A man appears to have been attacked...' said Shintarou.

'Could it be...' murmured the woman.

She had a smooth oval face and almond eyes – a beautiful woman.

The woman took a step forward to look at the man's face. Then, the blood left her face.

'Brother!' the woman screamed. She pushed Iori away and clung to the man on the ground.

It seemed that the man who had been attacked was the woman's older brother.

'Brother... Why did this...'

The woman buried her face in the man's chest and cried with heaving shoulders.

All Iori and Shintarou could do was stare silently. The man who had spoken to them first was muttering something to himself while looking down.

Iori was just about to ask what he was saying when a man who looked like a samurai ran up to them.

'Oume-san!'

The man called out to the woman.

'Tsujioka-sama. My brother...' said the woman in a faint voice, lifting her head slightly.

Then, the face of the man named Tsujioka turned red. He looked angry. Then, he turned that angry gaze towards Iori and Shintarou.

'We heard a scream. When we ran over here, he was already...' said Shintarou.

Tsujioka's gaze dropped to the floor.

'Bastard... This is the work of the crossroads killer!' shouted Tsujioka. He ground his back teeth together.

As the woman's sobs echoed through the night, Iori felt a gaze prickling her back, so she turned around.

There was a man standing there –

He was an old man, probably fifty or so.

He wore a mouse-coloured kimono and his loose hair fell on his shoulders.

He was terribly thin and wrinkled all over, and so pale that it was hard to think him alive. It was as if he were a corpse that had crawled out of a grave.

Despite that, his sunken eyes were bloodshot and filled with a killing intent.

– Could this man be the crossroads killer?

When that thought crossed Iori's mind, a cold shudder ran through her body and she couldn't move.

Even if she fought him, she had no way of winning. Though there was no reason to it, her heart knew. That was how strange the air about the man was.

– He's going to kill me.

The moment Iori thought that, somebody hit her on the shoulder. It was Shintarou.

'What is it?'

'The crossroads killer is there...'

Though she pointed, the man who had been there just earlier was gone, as if he had melted in the night.

– What on earth is happening?

Iori could do nothing but stare.

'Iori-san, did you see a ghost?' Yasohachi asked after hearing Iori's story. Iori was sitting opposite him.

They were inside the slanted building of an abandoned shrine.

The suffocating humidity and dim interior may have made the story even more frightening.

'It's likely – '

Iori shut her eyes. Her small fists were clenched tightly on her lap.

It was Iori, who studied the sword and hated to lose. She was probably angry at herself for being unable to anything.

It was mysterious how even that part of Iori seemed lovely.

'In short, a ghost committed the random killing.'

'That's what I think.'

Iori nodded.

If that were true, it was a terrifying story, but there was something Yasohachi didn't understand.

'Do ghosts kill people randomly?'

Yasohachi spoke to the man leaning against the wall.

He was the exorcist who was living here without permission.

His hair was untied and unkempt, and he wore a white kimono casually with just a red kimono sash. His skin was even paler than the kimono. He looked like he had just come out of a ghost painting by Maruyama Oukyo.

What stood out more than anything else were his eyes.

The man's eyes were a deep, vivid red. The colour of blood.

His name was Ukikumo.

It wasn't his real name. Since he wouldn't tell Yasohachi no matter how he asked, Yasohachi just called him that.

He had met Ukikumo through a certain case and had, ever since then, experienced many different paranormal events at his side.

He had also met Iori through a paranormal event. Otherwise, the son of a dry-goods dealer would never have been able to meet with Iori, the daughter of a samurai family.

Though Yasohachi waited for an answer, Ukikumo said nothing.

'Um... do ghosts kill people randomly?' Yasohachi asked again, which made Ukikumo sigh dramatically.

'Like I know,' Ukikumo replied brusquely in a low voice.

'Please don't say something like that so irresponsibly,' complained Yasohachi.

Ukikumo clucked his tongue at him. 'What's irresponsible about it? Who's the one who just barged into somebody else's place and started telling ghost stories?'

Ukikumo's red eyes glared at him.

Yasohachi gulped under the weight of that gaze, but he couldn't back down here.

'Ukikumo-san, you're an exorcist. This makes this a conversation about work.'

'Are you an idiot?' Ukikumo said mockingly. He poured some rice wine from his gourd into the cup he had with him and gulped it down.

'What's idiotic about this? I'm speaking honestly.'

'What's honest about it? It's not work if there's no money involved.'

It was just as Ukikumo said.

Furthermore, Ukikumo was a miser. He wasn't the sort of man who would help somebody out of the good of his heart.

'But...'

'Whether a man or a ghost did it, random killings should be left to the town magistrate's office.' Ukikumo interrupted Yasohachi.

'That may be the case, but innocent people are being murdered. I can't leave this alone.'

Ukikumo placed his gourd on the ground in irritation.

'Like I care.'

'If it is the work of a ghost, there will be another victim. Don't you want to do something about this?'

'I don't.'

Ukikumo yawned and then lay on the floor with his arm as a pillow. He closed his eyes.

It looked like he planned on going to sleep.

If Ukikumo was acting like this, he probably wouldn't do anything else. That was the sort of man Ukikumo was.

'Um...'

Iori was the one who spoke.

'If it's money, I will prepare it.'

'Oh?' Ukikumo opened his eyes.

'Why would you pay, Iori-san?'

Yasohachi cocked his head.

'Actually, there's more to the story - '

'There's more?'

Yasohachi's heart beat rapidly.

'Yes. I would think it fine to just leave it to the magistrate if it were just a random killing. The man who appeared like a ghost might have just been a trick of the eye – '

Iori looked at Ukikumo. Ukikumo had got up and was scratching his head. Perhaps his interest had been piqued.

After Iori saw that, she continued.

'The night after I saw the random killing, I couldn't fall asleep. Though I had my eyes closed, I did not feel drowsy. Then – '

Iori's clear intonation sounded strangely frightening.

Yasohachi gulped and cleared his throat to wait for the next words.

'I felt somebody's presence. When I opened my eyes, I saw a dark shadow through the screen.'

'A shadow?' asked Yasohachi in a shaking voice.

'Yes. The shadow advanced through the corridor. I wasn't sure who could be walking about at that hour so I rose and went out into the corridor myself.'

While Yasohachi felt a shiver upon hearing Iori's story, Ukikumo let out a bored yawn and poured some more rice wine into his cup.

'Was somebody there?' Yasohachi urged Iori to continue.

'It was a samurai in a grey kimono.'

'Do you mean – '

Yasohachi half-got up from his seat. Iori nodded.

'It was probably the killer I saw that night.'

'What!?'

'Just as I was about to chase after him, the man went into my brother's room. I slid open the screen to my brother's room to see what was going on.'

After saying that much, Iori bit her lower lip and looked down.

Yasohachi's anxiety swelled up as he looked at her slightly pale face. Yasohachi's fists were sweaty as he urged Iori to continue.

'That man had a knife in his hand and was looking down at my sleeping brother.'

'Wha – '

'I tried to hit the man to save my brother, but before I could, the man disappeared.'

'That's horrifying,' said Yasohachi with a sigh.

Ukikumo just snorted like he thought something funny and gulped down his cup.

'You were probably half-asleep. Just leave it,' said Ukikumo, wiping the corner of his mouth with his kimono.

Iori shook her head.

'I wouldn't worry about it if it were just that once, but this has continued,' said Iori in a lowered voice.

'It's continued? That would give one the shivers,' said Yasohachi.

Iori nodded.

'Don't make such a fuss just because a ghost is wandering your home,' Ukikumo spat out.

'Just because – anyone would be surprised if a ghost was wandering their home,' objected Yasohachi.

Ukikumo made a click with his tongue.

'Idiot.'

'Why do you say that?'

'You guys just can't see them. Ghosts are everywhere.'

Ukikumo's words echoed sadly in Yasohachi's heart.

Unlike Yasohachi and Iori, Ukikumo could always see ghosts. It was probably natural to him for ghosts to wander a home.

Since Ukikumo acted so reserved, Yasohachi sometimes forgot, but Ukikumo had seen things like that his whole life.

Perhaps he always drank rice wine to distract himself.

'I'm sorry,' said Yasohachi, which made Ukikumo look annoyed.

'That part of you really annoys me, Hachi.'

'Why? I just...'

'Just stop it. More importantly, the story isn't over, right?' said Ukikumo, pouring himself more rice wine. Iori nodded.

'That's right. Ever since then, my brother has been acting slightly strange.'

'Strange in what way?' asked Yasohachi.

Iori took a deep breath. 'He's fine in the day, but when night comes, he sometimes disappears from his room.'

'Maybe he just left for an errand?'

'I thought so too and asked my brother, but he said he hadn't gone anywhere.'

'That's odd.'

'Yes. Strangest of all is that he leaves the room with his sword.'

'His sword?'

'Yes. My brother disappeared from his room last night as well. I couldn't find him no matter how I looked.'

'So how is Shintarou-san?'

'He returns come morning... but last night, it seems there was another random killing.'

Yasohachi understood Iori's concern now.

Iori seemed to be worried that her brother Shintarou may have been possessed by a ghost and had committed the random killing.

'Please save my brother! I beg you!'

Iori placed both hands on the floor and bowed her head, her forehead touching the ground –

The daughter of a samurai was begging them, mere townspeople. It was clear how anxious she was about her older brother.

It hurt to look at her.

Iori probably didn't want to believe that her brother had randomly killed a passerby, but she couldn't help but worry that it was the case. That was how people were.

'Iori-san, please raise your head,' said Yasohachi, but Iori made no movement. 'It isn't clear whether Shintarou-san actually did kill somebody or not.'

'But...' replied Iori in a trembling voice.

'Please relax. Ukikumo-san will do something about it.'

After Yasohachi said that, Ukikumo just clucked his tongue very audibly.

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'Honestly. Getting me involved in something so troublesome,' muttered Ukikumo as he walked beside Yasohachi.

He had his red eyes covered with a red cloth and was walking with a metal cane to act blind.

Yasohachi thought Ukikumo's eyes beautiful, but Ukikumo felt the world didn't see them in the same way.

He hated the looks of fear and disgust, so he hid his eyes with a red cloth, but he had eyes drawn on the cloth in ink.

Yasohachi felt that was even more unpleasant, but Ukikumo didn't seem to care.

Perhaps this was just a difference in perspective.

'Don't say that. Please help Iori-san.'

Yasohachi looked at Iori, who was walking a few steps ahead of him.

Though she always did have a small frame, she looked even smaller today.

'You'll regret it afterwards if you get involved with the daughter of a samurai family,' Ukikumo said threateningly.

'What do you mean by that?'

'You've fallen for her, right?'

'She isn't the sort of person that a townsperson like me can fall for,' said Yasohachi with a sigh.

Iori was the daughter of a samurai family. That was such a different background than Yasohachi's dry-goods upbringing that it would be impossible to think of love.

'I said this before, right? Background doesn't matter once you get in bed. You're just a man and a woman.'

Ukikumo's lips turned up in a lewd smile.

Ukikumo was a pervert. He was probably thinking of something lecherous.

'I can't believe you're saying that after you just said I'd regret getting involved with the daughter of a samurai family.'

'It's just as I said, isn't it?' said Ukikumo with a snort.

'More importantly, what do you think of this case?' asked Yasohachi. This has been at the top of his mind.

Was it possible that Shintarou was possessed by a ghost and killing passersby, just as Iori feared?

'There's no point thinking about things now. I have to see for myself first.'

Perhaps it was just as Ukikumo said.

Nothing would change if they thought about things while understanding nothing. It was possible that Iori had just been half-asleep.

'You're right.'

'If you're in such a rush now, you'll embarrass yourself when you finally do get her into bed,' said Ukikumo with another smirk.

'Why do you always talk about things like that?'

'Why? Obviously because it's enjoyable. You have to think about how she'd look baring herself in front of you too, don't you?'

'Of course I don't!'

'Is something the matter?'

Iori turned around. Yasohachi had spoken louder than he intended.

'N-no... It's nothing.'

All Yasohachi could do was try to cover it up with a wry smile.

He felt like his face was on fire. How much had she heard – Yasohachi was concerned, but there was no way for him to ask.

Ukikumo stifled his laughter.

It annoyed Yasohachi, but if he retorted, Ukikumo would only return with double the repartee. Yasohachi sighed and swallowed his words.

He decided to ignore Ukikumo if he spoke again. Yasohachi walked behind Iori.

They went through the Hagiwara household gate and went to Shintarou's room.

'Excuse us, brother,' said Iori, and she slid the door open.

Shintarou was reading inside. He slowly lifted his head.

'Yasohachi-san and Ukikumo-san. Thank you for your help the other day – '

Shintarou looked at them with his usual smile.

From what Iori said, Yasohachi had imagined that Shintarou would be lying on the ground with a ghost possessing him, so it was rather anticlimactic.

However, now that Yasohachi thought about what Iori said again, he recalled that she had mentioned how Shintarou was normal in the daytime.

'Thank you for coming all this way. I told Iori that I was fine, but she just wouldn't accept that.'

'No, please don't worry about it,' said Yasohachi with a stiff smile.

Shintarou was so indifferent that Yasohachi wasn't sure how to react.

Shintarou urged Yasohachi in. Yasohachi sat down with a straight spine. Iori sat in the same manner.

Ukikumo just sat with one knee up while leaning against the wall. He immediately took his gourd and poured himself some rice wine.

Yasohachi was so exasperated that he had no words.

Though Shintarou and Iori would allow it, if Ukikumo had acted this way in front of another samurai family, it wouldn't have been strange if he were killed right there.

'What do you think? Am I possessed?' asked Shintarou once they had all settled down.

He spoke so cheerfully that it was like he wasn't talking about himself.

Yasohachi looked at Ukikumo.

Ukikumo scratched his chin. There was a difficult expression on his face.

'Um... You don't look possessed to me at all...' said Yasohachi, when Ukikumo said nothing.

When Yasohachi's older sister Osayo had been possessed, she had not been as normal as Shintarou was now.

She hadn't eaten. She would say things that made no sense. Though she was Osayo, she wasn't – that was how it felt.

'That's what I think as well. That this may just be Iori's mistake – '

Though Shintarou agreed, Iori didn't seem to agree with it.

'Brother, I'm sure I saw what I did, and you don't remember where you go at night, do you?' pressed Iori.

Shintarou groaned. 'It's true that I don't remember, but did I really leave the estate?'

'You did. You suddenly disappeared from your room.'

'But we don't know if that's the work of a ghost.'

Nothing would be solved with Iori and Shintarou just talking like this. Yasohachi looked at Ukikumo again.

'What do you think? Is Shintarou-san possessed?'

'From what I see now, he doesn't look it,' said Ukikumo with a little sigh.

'Thank goodness,' said Yasohachi in relief.

'Iori was mistaken then.' Shintarou smiled, but Iori still looked unsatisfied.

'But...'

Ukikumo interrupted her.

'It's too early to say that.'

'Eh?'

'Now – that's what I said,' said Ukikumo curtly.

'Do ghost possessions come and go?' asked Yasohachi.

Ukikumo crossed his arms and nodded.

'Sometimes. Anyway, it's too early to say anything. I'll keep watch until night.'

Yasohachi could agree with that. He wouldn't be able to sleep if they left the situation like this. Putting Shintarou aside, Iori wouldn't be able to accept that.

'Thank you.' Iori bowed her head politely.

'And I want to hear about the first killing in more detail – '

Ukikumo turned his head to Shintarou.

The eyes drawn on his cloth seemed to glint.

'I don't mind. I'll tell you anything I can,' replied Shintarou with a smile before starting to explain the situation and about the man who had been killed in more detail.

Iori and Shintarou had been returning from an errand for Shounosuke, the current master of the Hagiwara family.

The man who had been killed was Taniya Samon, an assistant instructor of Shingai-ryu swordsmanship. He had been killed just in front of the dojo.

Samon's sister, Oume, and a private pupil of Shingai-ryu, Yamaguchi, had been the ones who came out of the dojo. The man who came afterwards was a pupil called Tsujioka.

Perhaps somebody had been waiting for Samon to return.

There was a large injury on the left shoulder, so it seemed he had been slashed diagonally from there.

Samon didn't appear to have drawn his sword. Either it was a surprise attack or he hadn't had the time to.

Shintarou explained clearly while adding his own thoughts. It made it extremely easy for Yasohachi to picture even

though he hadn't been there himself.

Ukikumo listened to Shintarou without saying anything, which was rare for him.

Since he was so silent, it made Yasohachi think that he might have even fallen asleep since his eyes were hidden by the cloth.

'Then what happened to Tsujioka after that?' asked Ukikumo when Shintarou stopped.

'I don't know the details, but I heard a man was killed,' lori said in a heavy tone.

It made sense for her to sound that way. If what lori suspected was true, the one who had killed him might have been Shintarou.

She probably didn't want to acknowledge that.

'Was the person who was killed a samurai?'

Ukikumo turned the eyes on the cloth towards lori.

'No, it seems he was not a samurai but a townsperson.'

'Hm. This might be more trouble than I thought,' muttered Ukikumo, putting a hand on his pointed chin.

Yasohachi didn't know what could be troublesome about it, but he felt like something terrible was going to happen.

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'Beautiful – '

Yasohachi spoke without thinking when he saw lori brandishing a wooden sword in the garden.

Her silent handling of the wooden sword was swift, strong and elegant.

Though she was beautiful in a kimono as well, hakama suited lori better.

The brilliance of her simple attire was not just from outward charm – it revealed the beauty within her as well.

'You're definitely in love with her,' said Ukikumo, who was swirling rice wine in his cup as he sat leaning against the wall.

'No I'm not,' said Yasohachi, his face as red as fire.

'Then what are you doing?'

'I just... The moon. I just thought that the moon is beautiful.'

'The moon isn't even out.'

Ukikumo snorted scornfully and gulped down his rice wine.

Yasohachi looked up. Just as Ukikumo said, the thick clouds hid any sign of the moon.

He felt terribly embarrassed, but it would be even more embarrassing if he acted flustered now.

'I was imagining the moon behind the clouds.'

'Don't quibble – ' said Ukikumo as he poured more rice wine from his gourd.

He really drank a lot. He had been drinking this whole time, but his face was not the slightest bit red, and he didn't seem drunk at all, which was one of Ukikumo's amazing qualities.

'More importantly, why would anybody just kill passerby?' asked Yasohachi, interrupting the conversation.

A crossroads killing was committed at night and at random. However, Yasohachi had no idea why anybody would do that.

'There are usually two reasons for a crossroads killing,' murmured Ukikumo.

'Two?'

'The first is as a test.'

'For a sword?'

'What else?'

'That's true...'

'Even a great sword is wasted if it is not used. The sharper a sword, the more one wants to test it.'

'Wouldn't a straw post be enough?'

Yasohachi had heard of people testing swords on straw wrapped around bamboo.

'They probably aren't satisfied unless they get a taste of the real thing, so they kill people instead.'

'That's...'

That was too outrageous.

It wasn't like murder was acceptable if there was a reason, but it was just too much to take a life just to test a blade.

'The other is for amusement. Though some people do it for money –

'How could anyone kill somebody for amusement!? Why would anybody do that?' shouted Yasohachi, leaning forward.

Ukikumo looked obviously displeased. He poured himself more rice wine and gulped it down.

'No point talking to me about it.'

'But...'

'Whether it's to test a sword or for amusement, to a samurai, a townsperson's life is as insignificant as a bug's,' said Ukikumo bitterly.

Come to think of it, Ukikumo had mentioned before that he hated samurai. Yasohachi felt like he had just caught a glimpse of part of the reason.

'But that isn't the case for all samurai.'

Iori and Shintarou didn't think of them as insects.

'I know that. But townspeople never commit crossroads killings. There's a reason for that – '

Though Yasohachi didn't want to admit it, it was just as Ukikumo said.

Not all samurai were bad, but crossroads killings were the realm of the samurai. Townspeople would never kill samurai.

'Can't we just live peacefully?'

'It's because the world is peaceful.'

'Eh?'

'Crossroads killers are rampant because we aren't at war.'

'What do you mean?'

'If there were a war, nobody would need to test their blades. They could amuse themselves in battle.'

Perhaps Ukikumo's perspective was valid.

'Is that another truth?'

'Well, it is how it is. In any case, whether at peace or at war, it's always the people who are sacrificed.'

'Is that why you hate samurai...' said Yasohachi, but Ukikumo stopped him.

The atmosphere about Ukikumo had changed. There was tension in the air.

'What's wrong?'

'I sense something bad.'

'Eh?'

'It might have got in already,' said Ukikumo in irritation. He took his cane and stood up.

Iori ran over. She seemed to have noticed that something had changed as well.

'Did something happen?'

Ukikumo ignored Iori's question and went to Shintarou's room. He slid the door open in one motion.

The room was empty –

'When did he...' said Iori in shock.

Yasohachi couldn't believe it either. They had been watching Shintarou's room. He would have had to open the door and walk through the corridor to leave.

Despite that, Shintarou had disappeared.

'Is there a secret passageway out of this room?' asked Ukikumo.

Iori seemed to recall something. 'Ah!'

'What do you mean by secret passageway?'

'Samurai estates have several secret passageways in case of emergencies.'

Ukikumo pulled down the cloth covering his eyes and looked around the room. Finally, he seemed to sense something and opened the door to the closet.

At first, it looked like a regular closet, but in the corner, a tatami-sized space was actually a hidden door.

'I should have realised when you told me he disappeared from his room...'

Now that Ukikumo mentioned it, Iori had said that Shintarou went missing from his room.

Yasohachi had thought it was just a metaphor, but it seemed that hadn't been the case.

'I will go look for him!'

Iori's face was pale as she ran out of the room.

Yasohachi went after her.

Though they flew out of the gate, they stopped there.

He looked around, but Shintarou was nowhere to be seen. They had no idea where he had gone, so they had no way to look for him.

Just as Yasohachi was at a loss, a shriek – 'Guwaahh!' – echoed through the street.

Yasohachi and Iori exchanged a glance and then ran towards the source of the voice.

Iori was faster than expected. Even though Yasohachi had started running first, Iori surpassed him in no time. Yasohachi had his hands full just trying to keep up with her.

They turned a couple of corners and had reached Yotsuya-ookido when Iori suddenly stopped.

Yasohachi panted as he looked up. He saw two people at the end of the street.

One had an oval face and a huge frame. It was Yamaguchi, the private pupil of Shingai-ryu.

Whether surprised or frightened, his eyes were wide and his mouth was gaping.

The other was a man in an undershirt wielding a sword –

'Brother!' screamed Iori.

The man holding the sword slowly turned towards them. At the same time, the clouds covering the moon parted.

The reddish moonlight undoubtedly shone down on Shintarou –

He was clearly strange His eyes were bloodshot and his lips were twisted in anger.

'Brother... is that you?' asked Iori in a trembling voice, like she couldn't believe her eyes.

'Aagh...'

Shintarou groaned and raised his sword towards lori.

– He can't mean to kill lori!?

lori held up a wooden sword, but her hands were shaking. It probably wasn't from fear. She was shaken by Shintarou's strange behaviour.

Even lori had no way of winning like this.

'Brother... please return to your senses,' begged lori with tears in her eyes, but her words didn't seem to reach Shintarou's ears. Shintarou waved his sword.

– lori's going to be killed if this continues.

'Please lend that to me.'

Yasohachi took the wooden sword from lori and faced Shintarou with it. That said, Yasohachi had no training. He was in a terrible position.

Shintarou's bloodshot eyes moved from lori to Yasohachi.

Though Yasohachi had managed to get Shintarou to look away from lori, he didn't know what to do now. While he was thinking about this, Shintarou came rushing at him.

– He's going to kill me!

The moment that thought crossed Yasohachi's mind, a dark shadow quickly pushed Shintarou away.

Shintarou fell to the ground, dropped his sword and stopped moving.

'Don't just jump in without thinking, you idiot.'

It was Ukikumo.

He glared at Yasohachi with two red eyes.

It seemed Ukikumo had saved him. Yasohachi had been so intent on saving lori, but perhaps, just as Ukikumo had said, he had been reckless.

'Why... did this...'

lori was in shock. Her knees buckled underneath her and she sat down.

Yasohachi didn't know what to say to her. All he could do was look at lori, who had crumpled to the ground –

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'This is terrible – '

Yasohachi looked down at Shintarou, who was sleeping in a futon.

Shintarou had collapsed, so they had taken him to the familiar clinic of Koishikawa Souten.

Koishikawa was examining Shintarou now. He was still in his undershirt since they had awoken him in the middle of the night.

'I think he's just unconscious,' said Koishikawa with a sigh after finishing his examination.

'Thank goodness...' said Yasohachi in relief, but Iori, sitting at Shintarou's side, still had a hard look on her face.

Even if Shintarou was fine physically, the incident hadn't been solved.

'Please let him sleep like this for today. He will probably wake up as normal tomorrow,' said Koishikawa as he stood up. Just as he did so, the door opened and Ukikumo peered in.

'Eek!'

Koishikawa's face twitched.

Yasohachi understood how Koishikawa felt. The case which had acquainted Koishikawa with Yasohachi and Iori had not been a pleasant one.

Ukikumo had grasped one of his weaknesses then.

'Oi, quack doctor.'

Ukikumo put a hand on Koishikawa's shoulder.

'Y-yes...'

He was so frightened it hurt to look at him.

'You didn't give him any strange medicine, right?'

Under Ukikumo's red-eyed glare, Koishikawa looked like he was going to cry.

Though it was incredibly mean-spirited to bring up that case now, it was partly Koishikawa's fault for doing what he did, so Yasohachi couldn't say anything.

'O-of course not... I haven't done anything...'

Koishikawa shook his head furiously.

'Really? All of the crossroads killings so far have been close to your clinic. Don't you think that's strange?'

'Eh? I-I don't know anything.'

Though it was probably because he was afraid of Ukikumo, the haltering nature of his speech made it seem like he was hiding something.

Iori was watching them with a suspicious expression on her face.

'Ukikumo-san, you should let him off,' interrupted Yasohachi. He couldn't help it when he saw how pitiful Koishikawa looked.

'Well, a coward like you wouldn't have anything to do with crossroads killings.'

Ukikumo let go of Koishikawa, who ran out of the room.

'Did something happen?' asked Iori, who seemed suspicious of Koishikawa's flustered state.

Many things had happened, but they couldn't discuss it. Especially not to Iori and Shintarou. Yasohachi would rather sew his mouth shut than speak.

What Koishikawa had done closely involved Iori and Shintarou.

'M-more importantly, what is going to happen to Shintarou-san?'

Yasohachi forcibly changed the topic.

Ukikumo had his cane on his shoulder as he sat down and sighed.

'From what I see, he isn't possessed by a ghost – '

'Then is that the end of it?'

'Idiot!'

Ukikumo poked him with his cane.

'Ouch!'

'He wasn't possessed in the daytime today either. He was possessed at night.'

'Oh, I see...'

Now that Ukikumo mentioned it, that was right. They didn't know when Shintarou might be possessed again.

'Why is my brother possessed? And why would he commit...'

Iori looked at Ukikumo pleadingly.

She was frantic in trying to save her brother. Yasohachi wanted to help her, but he could do nothing.

If only he could see ghosts like Ukikumo – the thought came to him, but he didn't say it.

Ukikumo, who could see ghosts, had lived his life having to bear that weight. Saying that thought would be like denying everything Ukikumo had experienced.

'That's the problem.'

Ukikumo put his cane on the floor and poured rice wine from his gourd into his cup.

Normally, he would gulp it down, but he just looked at his cup like he was thinking.

After a while, Ukikumo murmured, 'There's something strange about this case.'

'Something strange?'

'I don't understand the goal of the crossroads killings.'

'Is there a goal?'

'Of course.'

'But you said that crossroads killing were for testing a new blade or for amusement – '

'Idiot. Both of those are goals, aren't they?'

Now that Ukikumo mentioned it.

Even if they were selfish actions, from the view of the person committing the crossroads killings, that was the goal.

'Then is the goal not amusement this time?'

For somebody who had died and become a ghost, it was pointless to test a new sword. That would make the goal amusement.

After Yasohachi said that, Ukikumo made a click with his tongue in irritation.

'You don't understand anything.'

'Why do you say that?'

'Ghosts are the spirits of people who are already dead.'

'Yes.'

Yasohachi had heard this explanation from Ukikumo countless times before. That was why he had said what he had.

'What amusement would a dead person get from killing somebody alive?'

'Maybe they hate the living because they're dead?' suggested Yasohachi.

Ukikumo smiled bitterly. 'If that were the case, we wouldn't be able to stop the crossroads killing.'

'Ah!'

It was just as Ukikumo said.

Ukikumo's method of exorcising spirits was different from the usual.

He didn't chant sutras to expel spirits. He found the reason they were wandering and eradicated that reason so that the spirits would leave.

If the spirit committing crossroads killings was wandering because he hated everyone who was alive, Ukikumo would be unable to do anything.

'Could it not be to test their skill?' said Iori in a heavy voice.

'What do you mean?'

'Though this is just a feeling, I think that ghost was a killed swordsman while alive. Perhaps he wants to keep testing his skill even after his death.'

'I see - '

Yasohachi nodded in admiration. It was very like the daughter of a samurai family to think that way.

The first man murdered was Samon, an assistant instructor of Shingai-ryu. He probably was fairly skilled himself.

Though Yasohachi didn't understand himself, if one were seeking to improve one's skill, it would make sense to duel with a man like that.

'That's possible, but something seems odd.'

Ukikumo narrowed his red eyes.

'What is it?'

Yasohachi didn't know what was odd about it. Ukikumo gulped down his rice wine, sighed and then said, 'The man who was about to be killed by Shintarou earlier.'

'Ah,' said Iori. It seemed she understood.

'That man is Yamaguchi, a private pupil of Shingai-ryu at the dojo of Taniya Samon-sama, the man who was killed first.'

Yasohachi clapped his hands together after hearing Iori's explanation.

'It's hard to think of it as a coincidence if they're both from the same dojo.'

'That's what bothers me. There might be a reason that these are the people being killed.'

Ukikumo smiled.

To Yasohachi, the smile looked terribly obscene –

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'This is really terrible,' said Yasohachi as he walked the sunlit road.

'That's why I said I didn't want to do this,' said Ukikumo beside him with a click of his tongue.

He had his eyes covered with the usual red cloth and was using a cane to pretend to be blind.

Though Ukikumo said things like that, he always stuck his neck in because he couldn't leave things along. That was one of his good points.

Of course, Yasohachi would never say that. If he did, Ukikumo would just go home in a perverse fit. That was how Ukikumo was.

'Will Shintarou-san be all right?' asked Yasohachi. This had been bothering him.

Shintarou had woken up at Koishikawa Clinic this morning. They had asked him a number of things, but he had no memory of what had happened at all.

He had never been in terribly good health, so it had been assumed to be exhaustion.

'He should be fine. Told him to hole up in the storeroom,' said Ukikumo with a snort.

'Holing up in a storeroom isn't really fine, is it?'

'Idiot. If we let him loose, he might actually kill somebody this time,' said Ukikumo in a lower voice.

He was right. They had managed to fix the situation last night, but that might not be the case next time. Somebody had been killed the night before that.

They would probably have to keep him in until they expelled the spirit of the crossroads killer.

'So where are we going?'

Yasohachi was following Ukikumo, but he hadn't been told where they were going.

'You'll find out when we get there,' Ukikumo said curtly. He walked forward briskly.

When Ukikumo was like this, there was no point asking him anything. Yasohachi knew that from experience.

He silently followed Ukikumo.

They stopped when they reached an old dojo at a crossroads. Yasohachi knew what Ukikumo's intentions were now.

He caught sight of a sign that read Shingai-ryu.

A large-framed man came out of the dojo. It was Yamaguchi – the man who had almost been killed last night.

'Hey, you – '

Ukikumo called out to Yamaguchi.

'W-what is it?' said the man in a weak voice that did not match his body.

'I want to ask you about the crossroads killing.'

The moment Ukikumo said that, Yamaguchi's face grew pale. Perhaps he was recalling the events of last night.

'I-I know nothing.'

Yamaguchi tried to go back inside the dojo, but Ukikumo didn't let him.

He blocked Yamaguchi off with his cane and glared at him with the eyes drawn on his blindfold. Even though they were just drawn on, there was an intimidating air to them. It was mysterious.

Yamaguchi gulped.

'Don't play the fool. I can tell you know something.'

Ukikumo brought his face close to Yamaguchi's ear.

'I-I really don't know...'

'If you wish to discuss that, I will talk – '

It was a woman's voice.

Yasohachi looked and saw a woman standing there. She was elegant and beautiful with almond eyes.

'Who are you?' asked Ukikumo.

'My name is Ume,' said the woman.

From what Iori said, she was the younger sister of Samon, who had been killed by the crossroads killer. She was more beautiful than the story had suggested.

Oume led them into a room in the dojo.

Though Yasohachi had thought a dojo would be livelier, it was quiet and dark.

'What is it you want to ask?' said Oume politely.

Now that Yasohachi looked at her again, Oume looked pale and terribly tired. Her older brother had just died. It made sense.

'I said earlier. The crossroads killing,' replied Ukikumo. He sat cross-legged and had his arms crossed.

'There is nothing I can say. I rushed out after hearing the commotion, but my brother was already...'

Oume shook her head and wiped tears from the corner of her eye with a finger.

It made Yasohachi think of Iori, who acted strong but was frantic inside. Iori was probably keeping her worries to herself too.

'Your brother, Samon. Anybody hold any grudges against him?' Ukikumo asked mercilessly.

'What do you mean by that?'

'Exactly what I said. Did anybody hate him or alienate him?'

'Wasn't this a random killing?'

'Maybe, but maybe not – I can't say it's a coincidence when two people from the same dojo were targeted.'

'Two people?'

Oume cocked her head to the side.

'You haven't heard?'

'What are you talking about?'

At first Yasohachi thought that Oume might have been playing dumb, but it seemed she really didn't know anything.

Why hadn't Yamaguchi talked to Oume about last night? It probably wasn't just that he hadn't had the chance.

'If you haven't heard, that's fine.'

Yasohachi thought that Ukikumo would have pressed further, but he backed down easily.

'Is that fine?' Yasohachi asked Ukikumo quietly, but Ukikumo didn't respond. He put his pointed chin in his hand and smiled meaningfully.

What on earth is he thinking – Yasohachi didn't understand Ukikumo at all.

'In any case, my brother wasn't the sort of person somebody would hate. He has been looking after this dojo – after Shingai-ryu – ever since my father collapsed due to sickness a year ago.'

After saying that, Oume sniffled.

It probably wasn't just Samon who had suffered. Oume must have gone through a lot herself, but she didn't show any of it.

'You say he's been looking after this dojo, but it doesn't look that lively...' said Ukikumo as he looked around the room.

It was extremely rude. Yasohachi wanted to say something, but Oume spoke before he could.

'It is as you say. We have had a sudden decrease in students since my father's death.'

Oume clenched her fists tightly atop her lap.

'Looks that way,' said Ukikumo, looking around the silent room.

'Shingai-ryu is a swordsmanship style created by my father in his own blood. For that to die out in just one generation... it is painful to think of.'

'You don't practise it yourself?'

Ukikumo mimed a practice swing.

Oume laughed and shook her head.

'I'm a woman.'

Yasohachi felt something wrong with those words.

In the past, he might not have thought anything, but he couldn't accept that now after having met lori.

'There are some women who practise the sword as well.'

He couldn't help but speak.

Oume's face twisted. Her expression showed not sadness or pain but anger.

'That is just quibbling. Who on earth would attend a dojo with a woman as an instructor?'

Oume's voice was harder than it had been before.

'That's...'

Yasohachi was at a loss for words.

Practising the sword alone as lori did and teaching at a dojo were different.

Just as Oume said, it was unlikely that anybody would attend a dojo that had a female instructor.

'What is going to happen to this dojo?' said Ukikumo, changing the topic. Oume's expression seemed to turn even harder.

'Though it hasn't been decided yet, but it may be necessary to close it down.'

'That's...'

Yasohachi couldn't help but speak, feeling the weight of the crossroads killer's actions.

'Perhaps it might have been necessary even if my brother were still alive...'

Just as Oume finished speaking, the door opened and a man came in.

He had a sword at his waist and wore the clothes of a samurai. He was probably in his mid-twenties. His eyes were incredibly sharp.

'Who could you be? What are you doing here?' the man said in a sharp voice.

'Declare yourself before asking the same of others. Are you an idiot?'

Ukikumo wasn't shaken by the man's appearance at all. He glared at him with the eyes drawn on his blindfold.

For a moment, the man's expression stiffened, perhaps shocked by Ukikumo's strange appearance, but he immediately caught himself.

'I am a pupil of Shingai-ryu. My name is Tsujioka, and I am the retainer of the Endou family.'

When Tsujioka gave his name, Ukikumo smiled mockingly.

'Is something funny?'

'You were acting so arrogant that I thought you were from some big samurai family, but it's just a puny family, and you're only the retainer at that.'

'You bastard!'

Tsujioka placed his hand on the handle of his sword.

'Draw your sword if you can. I came here on behalf of the Aoyama family. If you kill me, you won't get away with it.'

Ukikumo stood up and drew closer to Tsujioka.

The thing about the Aoyama family was a complete lie, but it seemed to work on Tsujioka. He just said, 'Urgh,' and stopped speaking after that.

Though he was arrogant towards those below him, upon hearing the name of a stronger samurai family, he grew quiet.

There were many men like Tsujioka among the samurai.

'Sorry for bothering – '

Ukikumo said just that and left.

Yasohachi didn't want to be left behind in this suffocating atmosphere. He ran after Ukikumo.

'I will take vengeance – '

Just as Yasohachi was about to leave, Tsujioka spat that out.

'Eh?'

'I will take vengeance against the man who killed Samon-dono. You do not need to do anything.'

Yasohachi had nothing to say in response to Tsujioka's killing intent, so he left the room silently –

'That ended up feeling a bit strange,' murmured Yasohachi upon leaving the dojo. Ukikumo, who had been waiting outside, snorted in laughter.

'How troublesome,' Ukikumo said with a sigh. He used his cane and pretended to be a blind man walking.

'Do you think that Samon-san angered somebody and was killed for that?' asked Yasohachi as he ran after Ukikumo.

'That's what I thought at first... but I don't think it's a grudge.'

'Then Samon-san was just killed randomly.'

'You really are an idiot.'

Ukikumo pulled the cloth covering his eyes up and glared at Yasohachi with just his left eye.

When that red eye looked at him, it felt like he was being sucked in. It was strange.

'What's idiotic about what I said?'

'Idiots are idiots.'

'I won't understand unless you tell me properly.'

'More importantly, I have a request.'

'A request?'

Yasohachi cocked his head to the side. Ukikumo smiled. He seemed amused.

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After Yasohachi bed Ukikumo farewell, he returned to his home temporarily and brought his art supplies to the Hagiwara household –

He went to the same room he had the night before and sat opposite lori.

'How has Shintarou-san been since?' Yasohachi asked before bringing up the topic at hand.

'There doesn't seem to be anything wrong with his body, but it seems he doesn't know what is happening to him...'

'What is he doing now?'

Yasohachi regretted his question the moment he asked it. lori looked down sadly.

'He is in the storeroom by himself. It is locked from outside, so I don't think he will be leaving.'

Even if there was no helping it, lori had to feel bad about locking her brother Shintarou in the storeroom.

Yasohachi had had to shut his older sister Osayo in when she was possessed too, so he understood lori's feelings painfully well.

When Yasohachi mentioned this, lori shook her head slightly.

'My brother cheerfully said that he'd be able to focus on his reading. Of course, he was trying to appease me.'

lori seemed pained as she averted her gaze.

'It's fine. Things will work out. Let us do what we can.'

Though Yasohachi knew they were just platitudes, they were all he could say now.

lori seemed to know that as well, so she said firmly, 'Yes, let's do that.'

'Actually, Ukikumo-san requested something of me.'

'A request?'

'Yes. He asked me to draw the ghost's portrait from your description, lori-san.'

Yasohachi had only seen Shintarou possessed, so he had no way of drawing the ghost without lori's help.

Though Ukikumo could see ghosts too, he had left, saying he had better things to do.

Yasohachi felt like Ukikumo had been trying to help Yasohachi out in his own way, but it wasn't the time to say anything about that.

'I see. I'm not confident, but I will do my best for my brother.'

Yasohachi was relieved by lori's immediate response. 'I'll get ready then.' He spread out his art supplies and prepared to paint.

Yasohachi was anxious himself since it was his first time doing something like this, but dwelling on that now would do nothing.

'Let us begin – '

Once Yasohachi had finished his preparations, he looked at lori once more.

'He was very thin. It was as if he was just skin and bones.'

It was probably the first time lori had had a portrait drawn of someone based on her description. Her tone seemed rather anxious.

'Thin – '

Yasohachi used a brush to draw the outline of a face based on lori's words. He exaggerated it too much and made him look like a cucumber.

'He wasn't that thin,' said lori with a small smile.

It might have been the first time Yasohachi had seen her smile since the incident. If lori would smile even for a moment, Yasohachi felt happy he had made a mistake.

'Of course.'

'Though he was thin, his face was not long.'

When Yasohachi heard the word thing, he thought long as well, but it seemed that wasn't the case. He wanted something else to work from.

'Did he have any special characteristics?'

'Hm... He had a slightly square jaw.'

'Square...'

'Yes. Though he was thin, he was... He was angular.'

– I see.

The explanation just now helped Yasohachi imagine the man. Yasohachi used his brush on a new piece of paper.

'Like this?'

'Just as expected from you. That was how he looked.'

Iori's eyes were sparkling.

Though Yasohachi felt elated by the praise, he kept himself calm. He couldn't get ahead of himself.

'How about his nose?'

'It was pointy like a beak.'

'Did it stick out? Or was it more... droopy?' asked Yasohachi while demonstrating with his hand.

'It was droopy.'

'I see...'

Yasohachi drew a couple of noses on a different piece of paper.

'This one is close,' said Iori while pointing at one of them.

'This one then.'

'Yes. But the nostrils were a bit smaller...'

After Yasohachi drew the same nose with smaller nostrils, Iori exclaimed, 'That's it!'

'What about his eyes?' Yasohachi asked.

Iori held her breath. Her face went pale.

'They were bloodshot, but... There was something very frightening about them...'

Iori's words suddenly became vague, so Yasohachi's hands stopped, unable to draw.

'Frightening?'

'Yes. When I faced those eyes, I was frozen. I felt that I would be unable to win if I drew my sword.'

Iori's well-formed eyebrows furrowed.

Yasohachi couldn't believe it. Though Iori was a woman, she was very skilled with the sword. He had seen her defeat a samurai before.

That was why Yasohachi couldn't believe it.

'Even you couldn't beat him, Iori-san?'

'No, I couldn't. I probably wouldn't have been a match at all - '

'Is that something you can tell before you cross swords?'

'In swordsmanship, it is important to be able to tell an opponent's skill,' said Iori, her jaw set.

If Iori was saying this so firmly, it probably was the case.

'He was that skilled then... which means that he might have been well-known while he was alive,' said Yasohachi.

Iori nodded. 'A well-known samurai or an initiate of some style of swordsmanship.'

There was something that bothered Yasohachi about Iori's words.

'I see...'

'But why would somebody so skilled commit a crossroads killing...' said Iori, sounding pained.

'I don't know. However, swordsmanship is the skill of killing, isn't it?'

Yasohachi's careless words made Iori's expression freeze over.

Iori practised swordsmanship as well. Yasohachi had just called swordsmanship the skill of killing in front of her.

He had done it now – but it was too late.

An awkward silence continued.

'It is true that swordsmanship is a skill used to kill people,' said Iori.

'Eh?'

'But it is also a skill used to keep people alive.'

'To keep people alive?'

'Sorry, I can't explain properly now, but I don't want you to think that everyone practising swordsmanship does so in order to improve their skill in killing.'

Iori's words echoed in Yasohachi's heart.

Yasohachi, who didn't practise the sword, couldn't just understand, but he knew that Iori, sitting in front of him, was not the sort of person who would kill someone because she wanted to.

'I apologise.'

Yasohachi bowed his head deeply.

'Why do you apologise?'

'I said something careless without knowing anything.'

'It's fine. No matter what is said, it is true that there is somebody going around killing at random. Furthermore, one's skill with the sword does not have anything to do with one's character.'

'A skilled swordsman may not be a person with a strong sense of justice – is that what you mean to say?'

'Yes. That is another factor of swordsmanship – '

It had become a deep conversation at some point. If this continued, they would never finish the portrait.

Iori seemed to realise that as well, as she smiled self-deprecatingly. 'Sorry for speaking of something so tedious. Let us swiftly finish this portrait.'

'Yes, let's.'

Yasohachi nodded and began to paint once more.

At first, it had been difficult, but Yasohachi, the painter, and Iori, the explainer, grew accustomed to their roles as time passed and they managed to finish the portrait speedily.

It was imprudent of Yasohachi, but it had been truly fun for him to speak with Iori like this and paint.

If only it weren't such an incident – the thought crossed Yasohachi's mind, but if there hadn't been an incident, he wouldn't even have been able to speak to Iori like this.

That was what it meant to have a difference in class.

When Yasohachi thought that, he felt rather sad –

'Just as I expected, Yasohachi-san! The portrait looks just like him!'

When Yasohachi showed Iori the finished painting, Iori exclaimed in surprise. It was such extreme praise that Yasohachi felt embarrassed.

However, in contrast to that emotion, the finished painting was ghastly.

He looked like a thin dead man. Well, he was a ghost, so he was dead, but the eeriness wasn't just from that.

It was probably the wide fishlike eyes that made Yasohachi feel that way.

Though he couldn't express it well, Yasohachi felt something like thirst from those eyes –

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'Yasohachi-san – '

Yasohachi had brought the portrait he had finished with Iori to Marukuma when somebody called out to him.

He saw a man peer out from behind Marukuma's curtain.

It was a man he knew.

'Hijikata-san.'

Hijikata was a medicine merchant who frequented Yasohachi's father's dry-goods store. He had introduced Ukikumo to Yasohachi when his older sister Osayo had been possessed by a ghost.

'Hello.'

Hijikata bowed with a friendly smile on his face.

He was tall with refined features. Though Hijikata was friendly, there was something mysterious about him.

He had a gentle smile, but his eyes always let out a sharp light.

This feeling had only strengthened ever since Yasohachi saw Hijikata easily defeat a sword-wielding wandering

samurai.

'You are the daughter of the Hagiwara household. I've heard rumours for some time.'

Hijikata bowed politely towards Iori.

'You recognise me?' said Iori with surprise and confusion.

'Yes. You have practised at the Shieikan[3] dojo in Ichigaya, have you not?'

'Yes.'

'I'm acquainted with Kondou,' said Hijikata with a smile.

Yasohachi was surprised once again by how wide Hijikata's social circle was.

'Is that so...'

'Kondou said that you had good muscles. That you might be a good match for Okita if you kept practising – '

'Not at all. I could never be a match for Okita-san.'

When Iori looked down, Hijikata smiled, seeming amused.

'You're an honest person.'

'Eh?'

'That's what Kondou said. You are honestly practising the sword. You have no shady intentions, like desire for glory or the urge to defeat somebody.'

'I think that is what it means to practise the sword,' replied Iori.

Hijikata narrowed his eyes, like he was looking at something in the distance.

'Everyone is that way at first, but in the end, their desire grows. They compare themselves to others. They want to test their skill. That is why crossroads killings are rampant. It is incredibly difficult to keep that pure beginner's heart – '

It was rare for Hijikata to speak so much. As such, those words sank deep in Yasohachi's heart.

Iori opened her mouth to say something, but in the end, no words came out.

'Ah, I almost forgot.'

Hijikata had started to walk away, but he stopped soon afterwards.

'Forgot?'

'I was waiting for you, Yasohachi-san.'

'For me?'

'Yes. That man asked you to draw a portrait, did he not?'

'Ah, yes.'

Just as Hijikata said, he had been asked to draw the same portrait twice.

'Please show me.'

– Ah, so that's why.

Hijikata was a merchant, so he knew many things and many people.

Ukikumo had used Hijikata often for information regarding cases. He probably intended to do the same this time.

'This is the portrait.'

Yasohachi gave one of the portraits to Hijikata.

'Oh, you are as talented as the rumours say,' said Hijikata as he stared at the portrait.

It made Yasohachi feel embarrassed when Hijikata looked at the portrait so intently.

'Um...'

Yasohachi spoke up, but the door to the second floor of Marukuma opened and interrupted him. Ukikumo poked his head out, with a red cloth covering his eyes.

'What are you waiting around for? Get up here already – '

'I'll be there soon,' said Yasohachi, slightly annoyed.

Hijikata laughed.

'Hasty as always. I will take my leave then – ah, yes. Please tell him that the man in the portrait is just as I imagined.'

After saying that, Hijikata walked away so quickly it was as if he had run.

Yasohachi and Iori went past Marukuma's curtain and into the shop –

'Oh, Hachi. It's been a while.'

The owner of Marukuma, Kumakichi, called out to him. Just as his name suggested, he was as large as a bear with grizzly hair, but he was a friendly and gentle person despite his appearance.

Yasohachi had known him since he was a child. Ukikumo liked the second floor of Marukuma, so it had become their regular spot for discussing cases.

'Iori-chan, you're here too?' Kumakichi said cheerfully.

Though Yasohachi wasn't sure what to think of the owner of a drinking establishment calling the daughter of a samurai family in such a familiar way, Kumakichi was the sort of person you would allow that with.

'Hello,' Iori said politely as she bowed her head.

'Ukikumo's been waiting.'

Kumakichi pointed upstairs and then left after a customer called for him.

Yasohachi and Iori went up the stairs and opened the door to the room upstairs. Ukikumo was leaning against the wall as usual while sipping a cup of rice wine.

'You look carefree,' said Yasohachi.

Ukikumo replied with a click of his tongue. 'Carefree? I've been busy in my own way,' Ukikumo grumbled. He took the cloth off his eyes.

'It doesn't look that way to me...'

'I got Toshizou to look into things for me.'

Doesn't that mean you weren't doing anything – though Yasohachi thought that, he stopped himself from saying it.

He could tell that he would just get an evasive reply.

'Hijikata-san said that the person in the picture was just as he imagined.'

After Yasohachi gave Hijikata's message, Ukikumo murmured, 'So that really is the case.' He smirked.

From that expression, it looked like he already knew who the ghost was.

'Please tell me – who is the ghost possessing my brother?'

Iori leant forward.

Ukikumo smiled bitterly as he said the name.

'Taniya Mataemon – '

'Taniya – could it be...?'

'Yes. The father of the man who was first killed, Taniya Samon, and the man who began Shingai-ryu.'

Ukikumo nodded in satisfaction upon hearing Yasohachi's words.

If what Ukikumo said was true, it was a real state of affairs.

If the man who killed Samon was Taniya Mataemon's ghost, that would mean he had killed his son.

'Then this isn't just a crossroads killing.'

Ukikumo smiled at Yasohachi's words.

'I knew that from the beginning.'

There was power in Ukikumo's eyes as he smiled mockingly.

Yasohachi wanted to say something, but it was true that Ukikumo had said from the beginning that this wasn't just a crossroads killing.

'But... why did he kill his own son?'

'I don't understand either.'

Iori expressed her agreement in response to Yasohachi's question.

'Wouldn't be having this much trouble if I knew,' Ukikumo said carelessly. He gulped down the rice wine in his cup.

'Yes, but don't you have any clues?'

If they had no leads to solve the case, Yasohachi didn't know what they could do next.

Shintarou couldn't stay inside the storeroom forever.

'Well, it isn't as if I don't have any.'

Ukikumo put his pointed chin in his hands.

'What is it?'

'Please tell us.'

Yasohachi and Iori both leaned forward.

Ukikumo sighed, seeming annoyed, but he began to speak.

'According to what Toshizou found out, the Shingai-ryu Taniya family had a pretty big debt.'

'Debt – '

Yasohachi and Iori looked at each other.

'That daughter so that people stopped coming to the dojo after her father Taniya Mataemon died, but that wasn't the truth.'

'It wasn't?'

'The man named Taniya Mataemon had studied the sword earnestly. He just wanted to grow more skilful – he had never had any intention of teaching anyone.'

'Is that so?'

'Yeah. In the past, direct retainers of the shogun asked him to teach them, but he refused all of them.'

'Why?'

If he became an instructor, he would have been paid well. He would have become more famous too, and people would naturally come to his dojo.

'There are a lot of problems that come with that.'

'What problems?'

'You should ask the lady there about there.'

Ukikumo looked at Iori.

Though Iori looked surprised, she nodded and said, 'If one becomes an instructor, one would be paid well, but it would be necessary to go to practices and participate in banquets – one's duties would increase dramatically.'

'Is that so...'

'Instructors must not just be skilled with the sword – they must be skilled with getting on in the world as well.'

It seemed it wasn't fine just to wave a sword about. Just as Ukikumo said, a lot of problems came with it.

'Taniya Mataemon devoted himself to the sword. It seems he didn't even teach his own son Samon properly.'

Come to think of it, Oume had said that even if her brother were alive, they might not have been able to continue with the dojo. Perhaps this was what she meant.

'So the dojo was just a dojo in name and was just Taniya Mataemon's practise area?' asked Iori.

Ukikumo nodded. 'And he had borrowed money from a rather troublesome place too.'

'But how is that related to the current case?'

Yasohachi didn't understand.

'He borrowed money from Echizenya.'

'From Echizenya, of all places...'

Yasohachi knew of Echizenya too.

Echizenya was a loan shark in Ichigaya. The interest was higher than other places and collections were strict too. Echizenya was a loan shark so bad that you were as good as gone if you went there.

However, Echizenya still did well because there was no other place to borrow money from.

There were many places for honest loans, but there were requirements. In contrast, Echizenya lent out money with no requirements at all.

Those in trouble had no choice but to use Echizenya.

'It seemed Echizenya was threatening him into surrendering the dojo.'

'So Echizenya killed Samon-san for the loan?' said Yasohachi.

'Idiot,' Ukikumo said immediately. 'Wait until I'm finished. There was somebody who was killed after Samon, right?'

Iori nodded. 'Yes.'

She was referring to the man who had been killed the night before Iori came to consult them.

'That man was named Sakuzou and was an errand boy for Echizenya.'

'I feel even more confused now,' Yasohachi said honestly.

It was too much for just a coincidence, but he didn't know what it was supposed to mean.

'Excuse me – what should we do next?' asked Iori with a frightened expression on her face.

Ukikumo raised his left eyebrow. His red eyes narrowed.

'Wait for the right time – '

'Eh?'

'Did you not hear me? I'm saying, go home and sleep.'

That was just too irresponsible.

They couldn't just leave the situation like this. They didn't know when the next victim would appear.

Yasohachi was worried about Shintarou too.

Yasohachi expressed his thoughts, which made Ukikumo once more say, 'Idiot.'

'What is idiotic about this?'

'I didn't say we'd do nothing.'

'But...'

'This case is really troublesome. We'll need some tricks to expel the spirit.'

'Tricks?'

What did he mean by tricks – Yasohachi asked, but Ukikumo told him nothing.

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8

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The next day, Yasohachi went to the Shingai-ryu dojo again –

This time he was with Iori.

Oume wasn't alone either – she was with the private pupil Yamaguchi.

Yamaguchi was so silent that Yasohachi thought he might be mute. He kept looking down, which felt strange with his large frame.

'Thank you for your help the other day.'

'No, we weren't able to do anything – '

Iori looked away and clenched her fists tightly.

'What brings you here today?'

Oume's almond eyes narrowed slightly.

There seemed to be suspicion in her eyes, but it made sense for her to feel that way.

Her older brother Samon had been killed, and people who weren't from the magistrate's office were sniffing about the incident.

Yasohachi was grateful that she would even talk to them.

'Actually, this crossroads killing may have been the work of a ghost,' Yasohachi said seriously.

Yasohachi hadn't come here because he wanted to. Ukikumo had told him exactly what to do, including what to say.

'A ghost?'

Oume's eyes were wide in surprise.

'Yes, but that isn't to say that a ghost actually committed the murder. The ghost possessed somebody and used that

person to do it.'

After Yasohachi said that, Oume just sighed. It didn't seem like she was satisfied with Yasohachi's answer.

Yamaguchi, whose head was still lowered, looked up at Yasohachi.

'You might find it impossible to believe, but it is true. Proof of that is that the ghost possessed another person afterwards and tried to kill somebody else.'

'The ghost possessed another person?' Oume cocked her head, looking like she still didn't believe him.

Iori looked straight at Oume and said, 'My older brother.'

There was something like resolution in that voice.

'Your older brother?'

Iori's earnestness made Oume's face turn hard.

'Yes. My brother was possessed by a ghost and tried to kill somebody.'

Oume seemed unsure of what to say. She just murmured, 'I see...'

'Though he is fine in the day time, he becomes possessed at night and leaves the household. At this rate, he might actually kill somebody.'

Iori shook her head.

'Did you come here just to say that?' Yamaguchi said in a weak and high-pitched voice that didn't match his height.

Yamaguchi's dark and wavering gaze made Yasohachi falter for a moment, but he had to keep going. The real topic was coming up.

Yasohachi cleared his voice. Then, he quietly said, 'Actually, that ghost – is Taniya Mataemon-san.'

Oume's gaze was vacant, like she didn't understand, but then her face twitched.

'That's... It's impossible.'

Her breath was a bit unsteady as she shook her head.

'I understand why you wouldn't want to believe it, but this is the truth.'

'Then you are saying that my father killed my brother, Samon, and is killing other people too,' said Oume in agitation.

Yasohachi understood how Oume felt. Nobody would want to believe that a parent would kill their child, but that was the only possibility.

'That is what I'm saying.'

'What are you earth are you saying? It's true that my father and brother did not get along, but to kill him...'

'How did they not get along?'

'Please leave.'

Oume interrupted Yasohachi's question.

'But...'

'I will not forgive you if you insult the dead any further. Please leave.'

All the blood seemed to have gone to Oume's head. There was no saving the situation.

Though Yasohachi had said what he had, he felt that there was no helping Oume's anger. Yasohachi bowed his head and left with Iori.

'Why did Ukikumo-san make you say such things?' asked Iori after they stepped out.

Yasohachi didn't understand either. It was obvious that words like that would anger whoever heard them, but –

'Ukikumo-san does not do things without reason. He must have some sort of goal.'

Yasohachi had been involved in many spiritual phenomena with Ukikumo.

Ukikumo's way of exorcism was very different from others. He didn't chant sutras or use talismans.

He found the reason a spirit was wandering and removed that reason to exorcise a spirit.

Things that didn't seem to make sense at first fell into place at the end. Yasohachi felt like that would be the case this time as well.

'Perhaps...' said Iori with a nod. Then, somebody called out to them.

'Hello?' It was a unique voice, so Yasohachi knew who it was before even turning around.

'What is it?'

Yasohachi stopped in his tracks and Yamaguchi walked up to them.

'Is it true that Mataemon-sama's ghost is wandering?'

Though Yamaguchi had his head turned down as usual, his gaze was unusually sharp.

'Yes.'

'Do you have proof?'

That was hard for Yasohachi to answer.

'I don't know the details myself... but a well-known exorcist said that.'

'That exorcist is the one with the eyes on his red blindfold then.'

'Yes.'

'I see...' muttered Yamaguchi. Then, he turned on his heels and left.

'That person...' murmured Iori as she watched Yamaguchi leave.

Yasohachi waited for her to finish the sentence, but Iori said nothing else. She just stood there, silent.

'What's the plan?' Yasohachi asked Ukikumo, who was sitting next to him.

They were at a soba shop near Iori's estate. Night had fallen and few people were about.

'Eat soba, of course,' Ukikumo said matter-of-factly.

Yasohachi felt like he'd heard that line before. Ukikumo had to be doing this on purpose.

'That's not what I mean. I'm saying if it's OK that you're just happily eating soba.'

'Don't be so strict. Let me eat soba, at least,' said Ukikumo, sounding annoyed. Then, he started slurping up the soba in front of him.

Though Yasohachi was exasperated, the bowl in front of him enticed him into joining Ukikumo.

'It's about time –'

After Ukikumo finished the soba, he murmured that and put the bowl down. He started walking towards the Hagiwara estate.

– He just does whatever he wants.

Yasohachi hurriedly bolted down his soba, thanked the owner and ran after Ukikumo.

He caught up to Ukikumo at the Hagiwara's gate.

'Y'know…'

Yasohachi began to speak just as Iori burst out of the estate.

Her face was pale and there were tears in her eyes.

'Iori-san, what's the matter?'

'My brother! He's not in the storeroom!'

Iori's voice was close to a scream.

'What do you mean, he's not in the storeroom?'

Yasohachi sounded as panicked as Iori.

'When I brought a tray of food to the storeroom, the door was unlocked. I looked inside, but my brother was already...'

Iori stopped talking.

The storeroom had been locked from outside. How on earth did he get out? Yasohachi didn't know, but it wasn't the time to worry about that.

At this rate, Shintarou might kill somebody.

'Ukikumo-san! Let's go look for him immediately!'

In complete contrast to Yasohachi's urgency, Ukikumo just yawned.

'Don't make so much noise.'

'But...'

'Shintarou's right there.'

Ukikumo pointed at the end of the street.

His finger pointed at a man in an undershirt dragging a sword behind him.

'Brother1'

Iori was about to run over, but Ukikumo stopped her.

'The trick is still in preparation.'

'What do you mean?' asked Yasohachi.

Ukikumo pulled the red cloth covering his eyes and smiled.

It was obvious he was planning something that was no good.

Yasohachi wanted to ask what it was, but before he could, Ukikumo muttered, 'Here – '

– What was here?

Yasohachi followed Ukikumo's gaze. A man in samurai attire had come out from the shadow of the willow trees.

There was a cloth covering his mouth and nose so they couldn't see his face.

The man had a hand on the sword at his waist and carefully followed Shintarou.

'Who's that?'

'A mouse that has fallen into a trap – '

Ukikumo responded to Yasohachi's question and started following the two men after a pause.

– What on earth is he trying to do?

Yasohachi didn't understand. He and Iori exchanged a glance.

Iori seemed resolved. She nodded and then went after Ukikumo. Yasohachi had to do the same.

Soon, Shintarou reached the Shingai-ryu dojo. He stopped.

'Finally – ' muttered Ukikumo. He stopped as well.

Yasohachi and Iori also stopped. What on earth are you trying to do – Yasohachi wanted to ask, but then the man behind Shintarou unsheathed his sword. The blade glittered in the moonlight.

'Ah!'

Yasohachi was about to yell, but Ukikumo covered his mouth. Iori had tried to run up, but Ukikumo stopped her too.

Meanwhile, the man with the unsheathed sword attacked Shintarou from behind.

– He's going to be killed.

The moment Yasohachi thought that, Shintarou moved so quickly it was impossible to see him and evaded the man's attack.

The man lost his balance after his swing.

Shintarou didn't let the chance escape. He wielded his own sword.

'Toshi! Don't kill him!' shouted Ukikumo.

In response, Shintarou stopped for a moment, but then he brought his blade down.

There was the sound of metal hitting metal. The sword of the man who had his face covered split in two.

It seemed the back of the blade had been hit.

The man with the broken sword tried to crawl away.

Shintarou didn't let him. He grabbed the man by the collar and thrust him to the ground.

'Is this all right?' said Shintarou, turning their way. No, it wasn't Shintarou.

'Hijikata-san – '

'Yup. That's idiot Toshizou,' said Ukikumo with a sigh. Then, he walked up to Hijikata.

Yasohachi and Iori exchanged a glance before following Ukikumo.

It was obvious up close that the man was Hijikata Toshizou, the medicine merchant. The man collapsed at his feet seemed afraid.

'What on earth is happening?' asked Yasohachi.

Ukikumo's smile was almost lewd. 'It's simple. I asked Toshi to pretend to be Shintarou inside the storeroom.'

'Pretend to be? Then where is the real Shintarou?'

'Somewhere else,' Ukikumo said matter-of-factly, but Yasohachi didn't understand.

'Why did you do this?'

'You'll understand when you see his face – '

Ukikumo pulled off the cloth covering the man's face.

The man covered his face with his hands, but it was too late. He was Tsujioka, the pupil from Shingai-ryu.

Tsujioka had thought probably attacked Hijikata thinking he was Shintarou, but Yasohachi still didn't understand.

'Why was Tsujioka-san trying to kill Shintarou?' asked Yasohachi.

Ukikumo smirked.

'We're going to have him answer that now, in detail.'

After Ukikumo said that, Tsujioka tried to crawl away, but Ukikumo stopped him.

He stepped on Tsujioka's back and looked down at him scornfully.

'Don't think you can escape. You've still got something to tell us.'

The smile on Ukikumo's lips seemed bewitching to Yasohachi.

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Ukikumo and Hijikata bound Tsujioka and dragged him into the Shingai-ryu dojo.

Yasohachi was confused, but he followed them with Iori.

Ukikumo kicked Tsujioka down to the wooden floor of the training room and sat down.

'Is it all right for us to just come in without permission?' asked Yasohachi.

Ukikumo snorted. 'Just come in without permission? We've been watched the whole time.'

After Ukikumo said that, the door opened to reveal Oume and Yamaguchi with candles.

Yasohachi looked at Iori unconsciously.

'What on earth do you require at this time of night?' Oume asked in a refined voice.

'The guy who killed your brother, Samon – thought I'd let you know.'

Ukikumo turned the eyes on his blindfold towards Oume and Yamaguchi.

'Could it be that my brother was killed by Tsujioka-sama?' asked Oume in shock.

'N-no! I would never do that! Please believe me!' shouted Tsujioka. He had lost his composure.

'Shut up a bit.'

Ukikumo poked Tsujioka's stomach with his cane.

Tsujioka let out a groan after the hit and curled up on the ground.

'Isn't that a bit violent?'

Oume's reproach meant nothing to Ukikumo, who just poured some rice wine into his cup.

'I need to make something clear before I say who killed Samon,' said Ukikumo after gulping down his cup.

'What is it?' asked Yasohachi.

Ukikumo smirked. 'Taniya Mataemon, the teacher of Shingai-ryu, is said to have died of an illness, but that isn't the truth.'

'It isn't?'

Oume's brows furrowed.

'It's not. Taniya Mataemon was poisoned – '

Ukikumo's words brought an air of tension to the room.

Oume was so surprised that she just said 'Poison?' in a hoarse voice and staggered back.

'Yes.'

'How do you know?'

'The doctor who looked at Mataemon's body, Koishikawa, said that. There was no proof, but from the way he died, it could be poison.'

'Please don't make false accusations. Why would my father be poisoned?' asked Oume.

Ukikumo stood up slowly. 'Samon had a loan from Echizenya.'

'My brother was in debt?'

'Yup. Spent all his money on women in the red light district.'

'Eh?'

'Samon was under pressure to return the loan. He asked for money from Mataemon, but Mataemon refused and said he would disown him. Then...'

'Please wait! Are you saying that my brother poisoned my father?' said Oume in a shrill voice.

Yasohachi understood why she would feel that way. Nobody would want to think that a child would kill their parent.

'Not exactly...' Ukikumo murmured. He put his chin in his hand.

'No?'

Oume was completely confused.

Yasohachi felt confused too. He had his hands full trying to understand the situation.

'Samon didn't do it by himself. Somebody suggested it to him. Right, Tsujioka?'

Ukikumo's cloth eyes looked at Tsujioka on the floor.

'W-what are you saying... I didn't do...' said Tsujioka, sounding pained.

'It's already been investigated. No point playing dumb. You borrowed money from Echizenya too, right?' pressed Ukikumo.

Tsujioka let out an 'eek'.

'Samon and Tsujioka met in the red light district. Both of them had their hands tied with their debts. That's when they plotted to kill Mataemon.'

'Why would they do that?' asked Yasohachi without thinking.

Poisoning Mataemon wouldn't solve their debt. Ukikumo seemed to have guessed what Yasohachi was thinking and snorted.

'If Mataemon died, the dojo – the land and Shingai-ryu – would all become Samon's.'

'Ah!'

Now that Ukikumo mentioned it, that was exactly right.

'In short, my brother conspired with this person and killed my father for money – is that what you want to say?'

Oume's tone was terribly hard.

'Yeah. Another man helped too. The errand boy from Echizenya. They were planning on selling everything at a good time after Mataemon died.'

'Lies! Those are all lies!' screamed Tsujioka with a frantic expression on his face.

'Shut up!' yelled Ukikumo.

'You shut up!'

'Don't struggle now. I said this was already investigated, didn't I?'

'Eh?'

'You know the medicine vendor named Miyoshi, right?'

Hijikata, who had been silent until now, sidled right up to Tsujioka.

'I-I don't...'

'There's no point playing the fool. I heard it from Miyoshi himself. He said that he sold a poison with the root of aconite,' Hijikata murmured into Tsujioka's ear.

'I don't know anything! I don't know anything! I don't know anything!' shouted Tsujioka, shaking his head.

'Give it up already!'

Ukikumo slammed his cane against the floor. He undid the red cloth covering his eyes and glared at Tsujioka with his deep red eyes.

'W-what!? What's with your eyes!? Y-y-you monster!' shrieked Tsujioka.

Ukikumo smiled at him scornfully, grabbed his topknot, and pulled his face close.

'Shut up. These eyes aren't just red. They can see into the deepest parts of a man's heart. There's no point trying to run.'

The thing about seeing into men's hearts was a lie. Ukikumo could only see ghosts. However, Tsujioka had no way of knowing that. He was at a loss for words under Ukikumo's pressure.

'I see. Tsujioka-san attacked Shintarou-san because he thought his evil deeds would come to light,' said Yasohachi.

Ukikumo responded, 'That's it.'

Tsujioka had probably been hiding in the dojo somewhere and listening to their conversation.

Mataemon had realised that he wasn't sick but poisoned. Tsujioka wouldn't have been able to relax knowing that his ghost was wandering.

The ghost might reveal that Tsujioka had poisoned him.

Afraid of that, he tried to kill Shintarou, who was possessed by Mataemon's ghost.

'Now, let's get back to the story – '

Ukikumo thrust Tsujioka away and turned his red eyes towards Oume and Yamaguchi.

'Samon had planned to sell this dojo, but he was killed before he could. Who killed him then?'

Ukikumo slammed his cane against the floor.

Even Yasohachi understood what had happened now.

'Tsujioka-san killed Samon-san, thinking he could keep all the money to himself.'

No, not just Samon. There was another conspirator – he killed Sakuzou from Echizenya too.

'Idiot.'

Ukikumo put a stop to Yasohachi's thoughts.

'What's idiotic about that?'

'You've left out the most important point.'

'The most important point?'

'Shintarou's possessed by Mataemon.'

Come to think of it.

Why was Mataemon's ghost still wandering after death? That wasn't all. He had wandered the streets at night with a sword and turned his sword on Yamaguchi too.

'Why is Mataemon-san's ghost wondering?'

'You can ask him yourself – '

Ukikumo tapped the ground twice with his cane. At that sign, the door slid open. Shintarou stood there.

His expression was empty – it felt like his heart wasn't there.

Koishikawa the doctor stood beside Shintarou.

Ukikumo had said Shintarou was elsewhere. It seemed that place was Koishikawa's clinic.

'Brother!'

Iori called out, but there was no response.

'Is he still possessed by Mataemon-san's ghost?' asked Yasohachi.

Ukikumo nodded. 'This man – Shintarou – has Mataemon's ghost inside him. He was wandering the streets at night and trying to do something. You should know what that was, right?'

Ukikumo looked at Yamaguchi.

'What on earth are you talking about?' said Yamaguchi in a shrill voice.

'Shintarou – no, Mataemon's ghost – didn't he say something when he showed up in front of you?'

'No... Nothing...'

Yamaguchi shook his head.

'I see. Looks like Mataemon asked the wrong guy,' said Ukikumo with a bitter smile.

'Please wait a moment. What on earth are you talking about?'

Yasohachi spoke up, unable to hold it in.

Shintarou, possessed by Mataemon's ghost – hadn't he tried to kill Yamaguchi? That was why they had suspected that Shintarou was committing crossroads killings under possession.

After Yasohachi said that, Ukikumo snorted. 'No. Mataemon didn't kill Samon or Sakuzou. A living person did. Mataemon was trying to stop that.'

'Trying to stop that?'

'Yup. That was why he was wandering the night streets with a sword. Think back. Mataemon didn't try to kill Yamaguchi then, right?'

At Ukikumo's words, Yasohachi thought back on the event.

Mataemon had brought his sword down then.

They had just been so sure that Shintarou was killing while possessed by a ghost that they had ended up thinking the wrong thing.

However, Yasohachi was still confused.

'Who on earth was Mataemon-san trying to protect?'

'You don't know?' asked Ukikumo.

'I don't know,' said Yasohachi, but he really did.

There was only one person it could be in this situation. That was why Mataemon had asked Yamaguchi.

'The person who killed Samon and Sakuzou was you – Oume.'

Ukikumo declared the name.

Iori gulped. Tsujioka looked shocked by the name as well.

Yamaguchi bit his lower lip and looked down, which seemed to shrink his whole body.

Then, Oume – just after lifting her head to give Ukikumo a hateful glare, she ran out the door of the training room.

'Ah!'

Yasohachi thought Ukikumo would run after her, but he just waited with his cane on his shoulder.

'I'll never hand this over – '

Oume came back in with a growl.

She had a sword in her hand.

Oume held her sword up with the posture of a master. It wasn't something you could learn in one or two days. It was beautiful posture built up from continuous practice.

'What on earth...' said Yasohachi, feeling the weight of the pressure emanating from Oume.

'Oume-san wanted to protect this dojo and Shingai-ryu, which her father had created with his sweat and blood – '

Ukikumo's words made Yasohachi's chest feel tight.

Yasohachi didn't understand swordsmanship at all, but he understood how Oume felt.

Oume had seen her father create Shingai-ryu firsthand.

She had probably practised swordsmanship herself to chase after that back. That had been Oume's way of life.

It must have been more important to Oume than anything else.

But then somebody had stolen that away for greed. Even if that was her brother, related by blood, Oume hadn't been able to forgive him.

'I – will be your opponent.'

Iori said that and walked in front of Oume with her wooden sword.'

'Iori, you can't.'

'Please step aside. I will accept Oume-san's feelings.'

Iori held up her sword as well and faced Oume.

The air about them was heavy. Yasohachi couldn't approach, but if this continued, Iori could be killed.

'Iori-san...'

Yasohachi tried to step between them, but Ukikumo thrust him away.

'Let her do it.'

'But...'

Yasohachi's voice was interrupted by a yell of 'Yah!'.

Oume had brought her sword down with incredibly force.

Yasohachi thought Iori would draw back, but she took a big step forward instead and thrust at Oume's throat.

Though it was just by a slight difference, Iori's thrust was faster.

Oume fell down to the floor, sword still in hand. She stopped moving.

Yasohachi could only watch in shock.

'Mataemon. Is this enough?' murmured Ukikumo after a silence.

As if to respond to that, Shintarou lost consciousness and collapsed to the floor.

'Brother!'

Iori ran to her brother immediately.

'It's fine. Mataemon's gone,' Ukikumo murmured.

'Is it over now?'

Ukikumo didn't respond to Yasohachi. He walked over to Oume.

'You're listening, right? This is a message from your father, Mataemon – '

Oume had a hand on her neck as she stood up unsteadily.

She held her sword up again and tried to slice at Ukikumo, but Ukikumo didn't pay that any attention. He brought his face close to Oume's ear.

'I poured my blood and tears into refining the art of the sword, but because of that, I sacrificed you and your brother.'

'Wha – '

'Even though you were what was truly important to me, I had forgotten.'

'...'

'Sorry – '

The sword fell from Oume's hand –

Oume collapsed to the floor and started sobbing like a newborn.

Yasohachi could only watch her silently.

-

epilogue

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'Thank goodness,' said Yasohachi.

Iori had come to tell him that Shintarou had regained consciousness.

They were at the shrine where Ukikumo lived –

'Yes. It is all thanks to you two.'

Iori bowed her head formally.

'No, no. I didn't do anything.'

'You really didn't. You're no better than dead weight,' Ukikumo mocked.

Ukikumo sat with his back against the wall and was staring at the rice wine in his cup emotionlessly.

'I don't deny that. It's the truth,' Yasohachi said firmly.

'Don't go putting on airs,' said Ukikumo with a frown.

'That isn't true. Yasohachi-san, you drew the portrait,' said Iori while shaking her head.

It was true that he had drawn Mataemon's portrait, but he didn't think it had been that useful.

'Er... There is one thing I would like to ask.'

At that point, Iori looked at Ukikumo.

However, Ukikumo didn't response. He just stared at his rice wine vacantly. Yasohachi spoke in his stead. 'What is it?'

'What will happen to Oume-san and Shingai-ryu?' said Iori, looking worried.

'Oume – execution, probably,' Ukikumo said quietly.

Yasohachi had known it, but hearing it aloud made his heart feel heavy.

It looked like Iori felt the same way. Her fists were clenched tightly on her lap, and she was biting her lip.

'Then the dojo and Shingai-ryu will both come to an end,' said Yasohachi.

Oume had killed Samon and Sakuzou to protect Shingai-ryu and the dojo, but as a result, Shingai-ryu would end. That said, even if Oume had done nothing, Shingai-ryu would still have come to that fate.

In any case, it was somewhat sad that Shingai-ryu would be over.

'The dojo is finished, but – Mataemon's swordsmanship will probably keep living on,' said Ukikumo.

'What do you mean?' asked Yasohachi.

Ukikumo kept his eyes on his cup as he smiled.

'Mataemon, possessing Shintarou, went to meet Yamaguchi – why do you think he did that?'

Yasohachi's question was responded to with another question.

Ukikumo had said the answer before.

'He asked him to stop Oume-san, didn't he?' said Yasohachi.

Ukikumo laughed. 'That's one reason.'

'Was there another?'

'Mataemon left it to him.'

'By it, do you mean Shingai-ryu?'

'The name doesn't matter. Mataemon hadn't been able to achieve the goal he wanted, but he chose Yamaguchi, thinking that he would be able to.'

Though Yasohachi understood what Ukikumo meant, it didn't fit right to him. There was a simple reason.

'Yamaguchi-san didn't look that strong to me.'

'You never look at anything at all, do you?'

Ukikumo's red eyes glared at Yasohachi.

Even if Ukikumo looked at him that way, Yasohachi didn't understand what he didn't understand.

'Yamaguchi looks like that, but he's strong. His name will probably get around,' Ukikumo said confidently.

Iori nodded in agreement.

Yasohachi thought about Yamaguchi again. Though he had a big frame, he didn't seem like anything special.

– Is he really that strong?

No matter how Yasohachi thought, he couldn't come up with an answer.

'Hachi. Didn't paint anything this time?' asked Ukikumo after finishing his cup.

'Ah, actually, I have something I painted last night.'

Yasohachi took out the painting he had brought and unrolled it on the floor. Iori and Ukikumo leant forward to look.

Mataemon was painted there. He had a gentle smile, instead of the thirsty eyes from the portrait.

'If Mataemon-dono had been about to smile like he is in your painting, maybe nobody would have died,' Iori murmured.

'That is what it means to choose a path,' said Ukikumo.

Maybe that was true. Mataemon had chosen the path of the sword and poured his blood into it, only to forget what was truly important.

If he had been able to think of his children first and foremost, just as he had said in his last words, maybe he would not have met such an unfortunate end.

However, that could be the case with anything, not just the sword.

Was Yasohachi himself sacrificing those around him while aiming to be a painter? What as the point of trying so hard to achieve a goal?

Various questions flooded Yasohachi's heart, but all he could do was accept them, unable to come up with an answer.

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#### Notes:

[1] The black ships in question refer to ships that came from foreign countries after Japan ended its isolation.

[2] Literally tsujigiri (辻斬り) this refers to the act (or the person who does the act) of testing a new sword on a human opponent.

[3] The Shinsengumi trained here in the Tennenrishin-ryu style.

# lautē, lautē!

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 [lautē.tumblr.com/post/143499847678/ukikumo-shinrei-kitan-novel-translation-volume-2](http://lautē.tumblr.com/post/143499847678/ukikumo-shinrei-kitan-novel-translation-volume-2)

*ukikumo shinrei kitan novel translation*

## VOLUME 2 – THE WAY OF THE DEMON SWORD

the way of the root of evil

-

prologue

-

'Have you heard about the curse of this swamp?'

The person who brought up this topic was Daijirou, who was also walking.

It was a night that was cold for summer –

They were on the way home after drinking at Marukuma, their usual drinking hole.

'What curse?' asked Kisuke. He stopped walking.

'That swamp over there – '

After saying that, Daijirou held up his lantern and pointed at the swamp behind the old estate.

Daijirou's face was as expressionless as a Noh mask. He looked frightening under the light of the lantern.

They had taken this path countless times. Kisuke knew that it was an abandoned samurai estate. It had been abandoned for several years, overgrown and uncanny.

– Was there a swamp though?

Kisuke was doubtful as he looked, but there it was.

Behind the estate that looked like it might collapse at any time, there was a dark swamp.

'What about the swamp then?' asked Kisuke, turning to face Daijirou.

Daijirou was thirty, the same as Kisuke, but because of his bald head, he looked much older.

'People say they appear here.'

'They appear? What?'

'Ghosts, obviously – '

Kisuke couldn't help but laugh at Daijirou's words.

Ghosts appeared? Even as an attempt to frighten him, it was a bit too childish.

'So what if they do? I'm not afraid of ghosts,' said Kisuke with a laugh.

Daijirou's face grew grim. 'You don't understand.'

'What?'

'People who see the ghosts here are killed by a curse.'

Daijirou spoke with such serious eyes that Kisuke thought it even funnier.

'Don't be stupid. Whose curse is it?'

It was a creepy place, but that was all.

'The master of the samurai family that lived in this estate was pretty well-known. Even held an important office...'

'Oh?'

'But one day, his wife fell ill. Ever since then, he was a changed man. Seems he tried to kill both the doctor and his wife.'

Along with Daijirou's words, the cold wind blue, rustling the grass growing about the swamp.

Daijirou made it sound very real, but most stories like this were just rumours.

'Stop telling boring stories and get going already.'

Kisuke tried to start walking again, but Daijirou grabbed his arm.

'Did you hear something just now?'

'You probably just heard the wind,' said Kisuke with a laugh. He tried to start walking again, but then he stopped. He felt somebody's gaze on him.

– What?

He felt suspicious as he looked about.

'Ooooooh.'

A groan reached Kisuke's ears.

It wasn't the wind.

Kisuke and Daijirou looked at each other.

Daijirou was pale. Kisuke probably looked the same.

'Ur.... gah...'

He heard it again.

It was clearer this time.

'T-tha....'

Daijirou's voice trembled as he pointed at the swamp.

Kisuke looked at the dark swamp. It swelled up, like it was alive, and then a dark shadow came out from within.

'Guh.... urgh...'

The shadow walked towards them, swamp water dripping. Drip, drip, drip.

It was obvious at first glance that it was not something of this world.

'I-it appeared!'

Daijirou dropped his lantern and staggered backwards.

The lantern hit the ground. The fire crackled and lit the shadow up.

It was an old man, thin like a dead tree.

Kisuke tried to run, but his body wouldn't move. Daijirou seemed to feel the same. His teeth ground together as he shuddered.

The old man was still approaching them, one step at a time.

Soon, he was right in front of them.

The old man brought his face close to them.

It was a creepy face, like skin plastered on a skull. His fish-like eyes were cloudy, with no sign of life.

'You... I'll kill you...' said the old man in a clear voice.

'Aahhh!' Daijirou shrieked. He spun around and ran off.

Kisuke tried to run too, but his body wouldn't move the way he wanted it to. He was frozen in place by fear and fell to the ground.

The old man's frightening face drew closer to Kisuke.

'Stop! Stop!' screamed Kisuke. He held his head in his arms and curled up.

For a while, he shook like a sign blowing in the wind, but nothing happened.

– What's going on?

Kisuke was frightened, but he opened his eyes slightly.

He didn't see anything. He opened his eyes in full and looked around, but he still didn't see anything. The old man had disappeared.

There was just the fishy wind and the sound of rustling leaves.

– Was that just a trick of my eyes from too much drinking?

Though Kisuke was confused, he stood up.

He was still half in shock when a warm wind brushed his neck. No, it was different from wind.

It was like somebody had breathed on him.

Kisuke was nervous, but he slowly turned his head.

The old man from earlier was right behind him.

'Die – '

As the old man said that, Kisuke shrieked and ran off.

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Unlike the night before, the sun came out bright in the morning and brought with it a boiling heat.

Yasohachi spotted a crowd around the bridge. He was on his way home from delivering textiles to a customer at his father Genta's request.

People had crowded around the bridge, blocking it off. Their heads were huddled together as they muttered.

– Did something happen?

Yasohachi took a look, but he wasn't sure.

There were rumours of robbery around the area, so perhaps they had caught somebody of that sort.

'Did something happen?'

Yasohachi spoke to a man nearby.

He looked like a merchant, with a wooden rack of goods on his back and bamboo hat covering his eyes. He was tall and seemed refined, but there was a dark air about him.

The man looked at Yasohachi sharply from underneath his hat, but he didn't say anything.

'Do you know what happened?' Yasohachi asked again.

Though the man must have heard, he turned around and walked away.

– What a strange person.

Just as Yasohachi thought that, somebody slapped him on the back.

He turned around and saw a familiar face.

'Kuma-san.'

It was Kumakichi, the owner of Marukuma.

He was as large and hairy as a bear, just as his name suggested. He had a square jaw and face and looked stern but he was a very friendly man.

Kumakichi had often played with Yasohachi when Yasohachi was young.

'Hachi. Perfect timing.' Kumakichi looked relieved. It sounded like he had something he wanted Yasohachi to do.

'What is it?'

'There's something I want you to hear,' said Kumakichi with a serious expression.

Kumakichi was usually in good humour. It was rare for him to look like this. Something serious must have happened.

'I don't mind, but can I really be of use to you?'

'It's fine. Let's talk inside,' suggested Kumakichi. It seemed like he didn't want other people to hear.

'Could it be that you're in love?' said Yasohachi.

Kumakichi sighed. 'That's not my sort of thing.'

It was true that he wasn't the sort of person who would become anxious over love.

'And I'm not the one who wants you to hear something.'

Kumakichi looked forward.

Under the roof of the dango shop stood a man. He looked to be about thirty and was glancing about nervously.

'Who is that?'

'Kisuke-san who's the head clerk at the sundries shop called Kuraya. Marukuma gets its stuff from there.'

'Ah...'

Yasohachi didn't think that he'd be able to do anything after hearing the story of a person he didn't know, but before he could say that, Kumakichi had started walking.

Yasohachi wasn't sure about this, but he followed Kumakichi.

Kisuke joined them and they walked together, but nobody said anything. They walked silently, the atmosphere suffocating.

When they reached Marukuma, they went up to the room on the second floor.

After the three of them sat down, Kumakichi introduced Yasohachi to Kisuke. Kisuke nodded. His face was pale – perhaps he was unwell.

'He wants to talk to you about a ghost, Hachi,' said Kumakichi in a heavy tone.

'A ghost?'

'Yeah. Kisuke-san will tell you the details.'

Kisuke looked divided, but he slowly began to speak. 'It was last night – '

Kisuke started speaking in a shaking voice about the abandoned estate of a shogun's vassal and the terrifying incident that had occurred at the swamp near it.

Kisuke spoke in great detail. It felt like they were right there.

Yasohachi almost yelped when Kisuke reached the point with the old man, like a dead tree, whispering 'Die – '

'That's terrifying,' said Yasohachi in a hoarse voice.

Kisuke had been very focussed on his surroundings as he spoke and started at every small noise. It hurt to watch him.

Kumakichi was silent, a serious expression on his face.

'Actually, there's more to the story,' said Kisuke with an odd expression.

Everything so far had already been frightening enough. It made Yasohachi depressed to think there was more.

'What happened?' he urged.

Kisuke nodded. 'I just ran. I didn't know where or how, but before I noticed it, I was shaking in my futon at home. I did that for a while, but then I suddenly came to my senses. What on earth was I doing? Wasn't it just a trick of my eye? That's what I thought.'

'I see.'

'I decided to leave my futon. Then – '

After saying that, Kisuke looked straight at Yasohachi. A shadow fell over his pale face.

Yasohachi's heart was pounding.

I can't listen to what comes next – that was how he felt. But he couldn't say it, so he just gulped and held his breath.

'He was there. That old man, right in front of my eyes...'

Kisuke covered his face with his hands.

Yasohachi felt gooseflesh rise in his fear too, and his shoulders shook. Kumakichi looked frightened too, which didn't match his image.

The silence continued.

After some time, Kisuke took a deep breath and said, 'I'm ashamed to say that I fainted... When I next woke up, it was morning...'

'There's nothing to be ashamed of. Anybody would do that,' said Kumakichi.

'Kuma-san, you don't have to console me. I didn't think I was such a coward,' muttered Kisuke.

Even though Kumakichi wasn't the sort of person who would say things he didn't mean to console somebody, it probably wouldn't help if Yasohachi said that.

'Was he gone in the morning?' asked Yasohachi.

Kisuke nodded. 'My head started working properly and then I remembered Daijirou, who had been with me... so I went to his house to check on him,' said Kisuke hoarsely.

'Daijirou is a poor wandering samurai who lives in a row house near Kisuke-san,' explained Kumakichi.

'But there was nobody at Daijirou's house. He's single, so there was nobody to ask where he went. Normally I'd just think that he had gone out somewhere, but what happened yesterday was still on my mind...' Kisuke stopped speaking, looked down and bit his lip.

They had run off separately after seeing a ghost. It was natural for Kisuke to be concerned about Daijirou's absence.

'Did you go look for him?' asked Yasohachi.

Kisuke looked up. 'I did, but since I didn't have any clues, I just walked around town. Then...'

Kisuke stopped speaking and bit his lip again, looking down.

'Did something happen?' Yasohachi asked.

Kisuke looked down further.

The story would get nowhere like this. Yasohachi looked to Kumakichi for help. Kumakichi breathed out and spoke in Kisuke's stead.

'The commotion at the bridge earlier – Daijirou-san's body was found there.'

'H-his body?' Yasohachi half-got up without thinking.

'Yeah. He was cut right down the stomach...'

'That's... too cruel...' said Yasohachi, his body shaking.

Yasohachi's shoulders slumped, but then he thought something odd.

'Could it have been the work of the ghost?' asked Yasohachi.

'That's the only thing I can think of,' said Kumakichi.

'Do you have proof of that?' Yasohachi asked.

Kumakichi nodded. 'There's a bit of a history to the estate where Kisuke-san saw the ghost.'

'History?'

'I don't know the details, but there's been a rumour for a while that there's a ghost there, and the people who've seen the ghost there die afterwards.'

'What...'

Yasohachi didn't think it was good to just accept rumours as fact, but he did feel like the ghost that Kisuke saw had something to do with Daijirou's death.

'I'll be killed next... I'm sure of it...' said Kisuke in a shaking voice with his hands on the tatami. He looked so frightened that he might just collapse at any moment.

'Hachi, could you ask Ukikumo to help Kisuke-san?'

Ukikumo was a man who worked as an exorcist.

He was Yasohachi's acquaintance and a frequenter of Marukuma. He had solved many cases involving spirits in the past.

Kumakichi was the one asking. Yasohachi wanted to help if he could.

He also couldn't just leave Kisuke alone when he was shaking in fear like that. But –

'I can ask, but Ukikumo-san is a bit moody.'

Ukikumo was troublesome. Though he was an exorcist, he was terribly slow to act.

'Doesn't seem that way to me.' Kumakichi shook his head.

Kumakichi only knew Ukikumo as a customer at Marukuma, so it made sense for him to think that way.

'And he's a miser.'

Yasohachi had had to pay an unlawful rate to Ukikumo in the past. Ukikumo had even stolen the contents of his wallet.

'How much will it cost?' Kumakichi asked.

That was difficult to answer. Ukikumo's moods changed like the clouds, as his name suggested. He might ask for a whole fifty ryou sometimes but do something for free another.

There was nothing consistent about that man.

'I couldn't say, but it's a request from you, Kuma-san. I don't think Ukikumo-san will refuse, so I'll try asking him,' said Yasohachi with a sigh, though he did feel anxious.

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'Hey, are you listening?' said Yasohachi to the man lying on the floor with his arm as a pillow.

They were in an old, slanted shrine.

The man had a refined look to his face, but his hair was loose, not in a topknot, and he wore his white kimono without hakama. The red obi was tied in a slovenly manner.

His skin was paler than the kimono – it made him look almost dead.

– This was Ukikumo.

'You're so noisy.'

Ukikumo glared at Yasohachi.

His eyes were the vivid red of blood.

He had his red eyes in the open since they were in the shrine now, but he usually covered them with a red cloth that had eyes drawn on them in ink to pretend to be a blind man when he was out.

Yasohachi thought the eyes beautiful so he didn't think it was necessary, but Ukikumo said that not everybody thought that way.

Ukikumo's eyes weren't just red. They could also see the spirits of the dead – that is, ghosts.

'I'm talking, so please listen. It's rude.'

'Barging into somebody's place and telling ghost stories isn't rude?' Ukikumo said lazily. He yawned.

This always happened, but Ukikumo really was good with words. Yasohachi wouldn't lose though. If he became depressed at something of this level, he wouldn't be able to get Ukikumo to move.

'Ukikumo-san, you're an exorcist, aren't you? I came here to talk about work.'

'You keep saying that, but who told you that?'

'Hijikata-san did.'

Hijikata was a medicine merchant who frequented Yasohachi's father's dry goods store. He had introduced Ukikumo to Yasohachi.

'That idiot Toshizou,' spat out Ukikumo.

'In any case, this is about work, so please listen.'

Yasohachi sighed, and Ukikumo got up.

Just as Yasohachi thought that Ukikumo had finally decided to listen to him, Ukikumo just picked up his gourd, poured himself rice wine and gulped it down.

'Work? The guy probably just saw a bad dream after drinking too much,' said Ukikumo, his own breath stinking of alcohol.

'But somebody is dead.'

That was the problem. Daijirou, who had seen the ghost with Kisuke, was dead, so it was hard to write this off as just a dream.

Even though Yasohachi was serious, Ukikumo just yawned. 'Like I care.'

'Please don't say that. Kisuke-san is very concerned that he may be cursed himself. He says he'll pay – '

'Who's this Kisuke anyway?'

Yasohachi sighed.

He had explained about Kisuke at the beginning, but it seemed Ukikumo hadn't been listening at all.

'I said, Kisuke-san is the head clerk at the sundries shop that Marukuma uses. It's called Kuraya.'

'Even if he is the head clerk, he's a townsperson. Don't think he'll be able to pay.'

And he went and talked about money – he really was a miser.

Yasohachi wanted to complain, but if Ukikumo fell into a bad humour, there would be no saving the situation.

'Don't say that. Please help.'

'Like I said, I don't care.'

'This is a request from Kuma-san. It seems Marukuma has been helped greatly by Kuraya.'

From what Yasohachi had heard from Kumakichi, Ukikumo drank at Marukuma on a tab.

He did whatever he wanted, so he should at least help a bit.

'I don't care about the things I don't care about.'

'Are you serious?'

'So I am,' Ukikumo said uncaringly. Then, he drank rice wine directly from his gourd and wiped his mouth with the sleeve of his kimono. It was so insolent that Yasohachi was irritated.

'Don't you feel bad for him?'

'I don't.'

'Why not? How can you be an exorcist like that?'

'I can say I don't care because I'm an exorcist.'

Ukikumo threw his gourd to the ground.

'What do you mean?'

'You still don't understand? I've said this before, but ghosts are like clusters of the thoughts of the dead.'

Ukikumo always said that.

Ghosts, which were the clusters of the thoughts of the dead, didn't have bodies of their own, so they couldn't touch anything.

Yasohachi had no way to confirm that, but Ukikumo was saying that and he could see ghosts, so it was probably true.

'What about it?' asked Yasohachi.

Ukikumo made a click of his tongue in irritation.

'Daijirou the wandering samurai didn't die at the hands of a ghost. A person did it – '

Ukikumo's red eyes glinted.

Under that pressure, Yasohachi leaned back and gulped.

'A person...'

'That's how it is. That's why there's nothing for me to do.'

Yasohachi understood Ukikumo's reasoning.

But was it really impossible for a ghost to kill somebody? Daijirou was dead. And –

'Even if it wasn't the work of a ghost, I think this may have something to do with the ghost Kisuke-san saw...'

'What's it got to do with anything?'

'I don't know, but I think there's something in that estate and swamp where Kisuke-san saw the ghost.'

After Yasohachi said that, Ukikumo's expression went stern.

'Hachi. Could it be that the place the man named Kisuke saw the ghost is the old estate with the swamp behind it along the Koushuu Kaidou?'

Ukikumo's left eyebrow went up.

Kisuke had been focussed on explaining the situation and hadn't mentioned the specific location. But –

'How do you know?' asked Yasohachi.

Ukikumo looked away. 'There's a rumour.'

'What about?'

'It's obvious, isn't it? A rumour that there's a ghost there – '

Ukikumo ran a hand through his messy hair in irritation.

'Is that so? Then I think it must be related.'

Yasohachi leaned forward.

Ukikumo stood up as if to escape from him. He looked as refined as he always did when standing. It always caught Yasohachi's eye.

'Might be related. Might not. Just leave it.'

'But...'

'If that man named Kisuke doesn't want to die, tell him to stop talking to everyone about ghosts – '

Ukikumo looked down with his red eyes at Yasohachi.

There was an unusual intimidating air to them that made Yasohachi hold his breath.

'Please wait. It really is related then, isn't it?'

'You don't understand anything.'

'What are you talking about?'

'Think for yourself a bit.'

'I'm asking because I don't understand after thinking.'

'This is the end of the conversation. Go home.'

Ukikumo opened the door and urged Yasohachi out.

It was obvious that Ukikumo wasn't going to hear Yasohachi out.

Ukikumo said a lot, but he couldn't leave people in trouble alone. Yasohachi had thought he was a compassionate man, and yet –

'You really aren't going to help?'

'Not going to do anything. Don't do anything else if you don't want to die. Go home and sleep.'

Yasohachi could do nothing more if Ukikumo refused him this way. His shoulders slumped and he left the shrine –

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'Yasohachi-san – '

Yasohachi had just left the shrine with his head down when somebody called out to him.

When he lifted his head, he saw a man he knew walking towards him.

'Ah, Hijikata-san,' said Yasohachi.

Hijikata smiled gently at him. He seemed like a friendly and warm person when he was like this, but sometimes he showed a different face.

Yasohachi had seen Hijikata easily defeat a wandering samurai before.

It was clear he wasn't just a medicine merchant. Yasohachi wanted to ask a variety of things, but the unique air Hijikata had about him made that hard, and Yasohachi had never been able to ask anything.

'Did you need something from that man?'

Hijikata glanced at the shrine.

'Yes, that was the plan...' said Yasohachi, looking at the shrine as well.

Ukikumo was still inside. Perhaps he was looking out at them through the lattice.

'He refused then.'

'He did. Even though there are people who are troubled... I didn't think he was such a cold person,' said Yasohachi with a sigh.

'That man is busy too, though you might not think it.'

'It doesn't seem that way to me...'

Ukikumo had just been lying on the ground while drinking rice wine earlier. He didn't look busy at all.

Ukikumo was always drinking lazily anyway. Yasohachi had never seen him look busy.

'Actually, he is looking into a rather troublesome case right now.'

'A troublesome case?'

'Yes. Well, spirits are involved. I made the request, even though it was difficult,' Hijikata said softly.

'Is that so...'

If that was the case, Ukikumo should have just said that he was busy and couldn't help right now. Yasohachi wouldn't know that if Ukikumo just shooed him away like that.

'What was your issue, Yasohachi-san?'

'There is a man who is afraid that he has been cursed by a ghost and will be killed, so I came to consult Ukikumo...'

'I see. Did he listen to you?'

'Yes, but he shooed me away, saying that there was nothing he could do,' said Yasohachi, depressed.

For some reason, Hijikata laughed aloud. It didn't seem funny to Yasohachi.

When Yasohachi looked at Hijikata, he immediately stopped laughing, perhaps feeling guilty. 'Well, that man is not an idiot. If he says there's nothing he can do, there is probably nothing he can do.'

'But...'

'Yasohachi-san, you're an earnest person, aren't you?' Hijikata nodded a few times.

If asked whether he was earnest or not, Yasohachi would say earnest, but when Hijikata spoke like that, Yasohachi felt like he was being made fun of.

'That's not it. I just can't accept it.'

'What is it?'

'Ukikumo-san made it sound like that case I mentioned was related to ghosts somehow. He told me not to do anything unnecessary if I didn't want to die. I'm sure he knows something,' said Yasohachi.

'I see,' said Hijikata. He looked up at the sky. Yasohachi looked up as well.

There was a line of clouds.

After a silence, Hijikata nodded and said, 'If he told you not to do anything unnecessary, it is probably best to believe in him and wait.'

It looked like Hijikata had accepted that, but Yasohachi still didn't understand anything. It made him feel uncomfortable.

'Is that really fine?'

'Yes, that's fine. Since that man said so – '

From those words, it sounded like Hijikata completely trusted Ukikumo.

To be honest, Yasohachi thought it was amazing Hijikata could trust Ukikumo with that attitude of his. There had to be a reason Hijikata trusted him so deeply.

'Er... Hijikata-san, how did you meet Ukikumo-san?' asked Yasohachi.

Hijikata looked slightly surprised. 'It would take a while to explain.'

'Does that mean you are old acquaintances?'

'No, not quite old, but the circumstances were a bit complicated.' Hijikata narrowed his already narrowed eyes.

It was a meaningful sentence. It made Yasohachi even more curious.

'Did something happen?'

'I am willing to discuss it, but I think that man probably wouldn't like it. HE's probably watching from the lattice right now.'

Hijikata looked at the shrine again.

Though there was no sound from the shrine, Yasohachi felt sure that Ukikumo was staring from within.

'Well, you'll find out eventually,' Hijikata said gently.

'Really?'

'People are connected by strings of fate. They aren't strings that you can cut just because you want to. No matter how that many dislikes it, it isn't something he can hide.'

'Oh...'

Yasohachi felt like he was being tricked by smoke with Hijikata's roundabout speech.

'Just as it was with Kanou Yuuzan...'

'Eh?'

Yasohachi hadn't thought that he would hear Kanou Yuuzan's name from Hijikata's mouth.

Kanou Yuuzan was a painter of the Kanou school. He was a shaman who cursed paintings to kill people without getting his hands dirty.

Yasohachi had been involved with Kanou Yuuzan before and knew how horrifying he was.

Yasohachi had sensed that Ukiyume and Kanou Yuuzan were related somehow, but from what Hijikata said just now, Hijikata was also involved.

'I've said something unnecessary, haven't I? I'll take my leave now – '

Hijikata was about to go, but then he stopped.

'Yasohachi-san, could it be that the incident involving ghosts you mentioned today has something to do with the vassal's estate and swamp by the Koushuu Kaidou?' said Hijikata, his back facing Yasohachi.

That was exactly it.

'How do you know that?'

'Perhaps his is fate as well.'

'What do you mean?'

'I also think it would be better if you didn't get involved with this case, Yasohachi-san. You will be swallowed up by the flow of fate.'

– What do you mean?

Yasohachi wanted to ask, but Hijikata went through the torii gate as if to run away from Yasohachi's question and walked up to the shrine.

Though Yasohachi could have called out to him, Yasohachi was stopped by what felt almost like a thirst for blood emanating from Hijikata. All Yasohachi could do was stand there.

Hijikata went inside the shrine and disappeared.

Yasohachi heard thunder in the distance –

'Hello.'

Somebody called out to Yasohachi as he was ambling along.

He lifted his head and saw Iori.

Her lovely round face had a gentle smile on it.

Iori usually wore hakama with training clothes, but today she wore an elegant kimono. The water lilies on the kimono suited her well.

'Iori-san –'

– Why are you here?'

Yasohachi was about to ask that, but then he realised that he was standing in front of Iori's estate.

'Is something the matter? You look depressed.'

Iori looked at Yasohachi's face in concern.

Her eyes were as clear as a stream. Yasohachi could feel himself blushing under the gaze. He felt strangely embarrassed.

'No, I'm just a bit troubled,' Yasohachi said as he looked away.

'What happened?'

'I was consulted about an incident involving a ghost and went to talk to Ukikumo-san about it, but he felt unapproachable.'

'I see...'

Iori looked at Yasohachi in sympathy, which made Yasohachi feel bad about saying something strange. 'No, it's fine. I'll do something about it.'

Though Yasohachi smiled, he knew it was unnatural.

Ukikumo had already refused. Yasohachi had no idea what else he could do.

'What sort of ghost is it?'

'Eh?'

Why did she ask? Yasohachi cocked his head.

Iori smiled. 'If you wouldn't mind my assistance, I will help, so please tell me what happened.'

'No, I couldn't...'

'It's fine. Yasohachi-san, you have helped me so often. Please allow me to help, even if it is just a little.'

'No, I...'

Iori was probably talking about the previous cases involving spirits, but Yasohachi had just been watching. He hadn't

helped at all.

Furthermore, he was just a son from a dry-goods store. He knew his place. He couldn't have Iori, the daughter of a samurai family, listen to his troubles.

'Ah, yes, you wouldn't want to discuss something like that in the open. Let's go inside.'

Though Yasohachi was troubled about what to do, Iori was the opposite – it looked like she was intent on hearing him.

Yasohachi couldn't just refuse her now. Yasohachi let Iori show him into the Hagiwara estate to a room facing the garden.

He had been to this room many times before.

When Yasohachi thought about how kind Iori was to him when her status was so different, it made him feel somewhat nervous.

'What happened?' asked Iori once they had sat down.

There were many thoughts on Yasohachi's mind, but he couldn't be silent after coming this far.

Yasohachi hesitantly told Iori what he had heard from Kisuke.

'How frightening,' said Iori after Yasohachi had finished.

'It really is,' agreed Yasohachi.

Kisuke had not just seen a ghost. No matter what Ukikumo said, the man named Daijirou had been sliced in the stomach and killed.

'I had heard that a corpse was found at the bridge, but I can't believe a ghost was involved.'

Iori's brows furrowed. Her eyes were melancholy.

It was strange how even that expression looked lovely.

'Yes...'

'I've heard of the ghost at that estate before.'

Yasohachi leapt up at the sudden voice.

He turned his eyes to the corridor and saw Iori's brother Shintarou standing there, leaning against a pillar.

'Brother! Don't surprise me like that!' said Iori angrily, but Shintarou didn't seem to care. He casually entered the room and sat down.

'I wasn't trying to,' said Shintarou with a smile.

This casual manner was just like Shintarou.

'Eavesdropping is improper,' said Iori sullenly.

'I wasn't eavesdropping. I was walking past and just happened to hear.'

'What is with that excuse?'

'It's fine, isn't it? I would have held back if it were an amorous conversation, but it's just a ghost story.'

'What do you mean, amorous...'

Iori's cheeks were slightly pink.

It seemed that Shintarou was teasing Yasohachi and Iori.

'I would not be so rude as to speak of such things to Iori-san,' said Yasohachi with a wry smile.

'Yasohachi-san, do you dislike Iori?' Shintarou cocked his head.

'That isn't the problem. Our social statuses are too different.'

Yasohachi, a townspeople, was of such a different status than Iori, the daughter of a samurai family, that even talking of romance was ridiculous.

Ukikumo said that status didn't matter between the sheets, but that wasn't how things were.

Marriage between a samurai family member and a townspeople were forbidden by the shogunate.

'That is a bit troublesome.'

Shintarou put his chin in his hands and let his gaze wander. He seemed to be in thought. Yasohachi had no idea if Shintarou was being serious or if he was teasing him.

In either case, they had gone off-topic.

After Yasohachi mentioned this, Shintarou clapped his hands together and said, 'Actually, I know a ghost story about that estate too. I might be able to help.'

'Um... What do you mean by that?' asked Yasohachi.

Shintarou nodded. 'The estate you mentioned is that abandoned building along the Koushuu Kaidou, right? With the swamp behind it.'

'Yes.'

'I hear that the estate used to be Fukami Shinzaemon's.'

'Is he famous?'

'Shinzaemon-dono was a sharp guy – even the Aoyama family couldn't outdo him. Well, there's also a rumour that he was rather greedy...'

'Why did the family come to ruin?'

'Misfortune befell him...'

Shintarou's eyes narrowed. Though he probably didn't notice himself, his flat way of speaking was rather frightening.

'Misfortune?'

'Yes. It was about ten years ago. First, his wife fell ill. The reason for it was unknown, and it seems she suffered a lot. Then, Shinzaemon-dono called for a well-known doctor...'

After saying that, Shintarou looked down, seeming uncomfortable.

It would bother Yasohachi if Shintarou stopped here. 'What happened?' Yasohachi asked.

After a while, Shintarou lifted his head. 'Shinzaemon-dono killed both his wife and the doctor.'

'Wha...'

It was so shocking that Yasohachi was at a loss for words.

The image of a man brandishing a bloody sword flashed through his head, making his whole body shudder with fear.

'Why would he do such a thing?' asked Yasohachi in a trembling voice.

'I wonder. Perhaps he went mad.'

'What happened to Shinzaemon-dono after that?' asked Iori. Her voice was high-pitched. Perhaps she was afraid as well.

'Shinzaemon-dono slit his own stomach and was found floating in the swamp.'

After Shintarou said that, a silence fell upon the room.

Yasohachi found it hard to breathe. He wasn't sure whether it was because of the summer heat or the frightening way Shintarou had told the story.

'Ever since then, people sometimes see a ghost there,' said Shintarou after a long silence.

'Then Kisuke-san saw Shinzaemon-san's ghost?' asked Yasohachi.

For just a moment, Shintarou looked outside.

Yasohachi looked out as well at the clouds in the sky. They were grey now.

'It may be too soon to say. What I heard was only a rumour. Furthermore I don't know whether what the person named Kisuke-san saw was really Shinzaemon-san's ghost...'

Though Yasohachi felt Shintarou was being too cautious, it made sense.

Yasohachi hadn't seen the ghost himself. He couldn't see ghosts like Ukikumo. If they didn't confirm who the ghost was, there was nothing they could do. But the problem was how to go about doing that.

Yasohachi was thinking when Iori suddenly said, 'Oh! How about meeting with Kisuke-san and painting a portrait of the ghost?'

Iori's suggestion made Yasohachi clapped his hands together. 'I see!'

If he went to talk to Kisuke again, drew a portrait of the ghost and showed it to people who knew Shinzaemon, he would probably be able to confirm a number of things.

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Yasohachi stood in front of the shop called Kuraya. There was a big curtain hanging over the entrance.

Yasohachi had returned home to pick up his portable brush-and-ink case and paper, so when he reached the shop, it

was already nearly evening.

Iori had insisted on going with him, but Yasohachi had refused.

This case had nothing to do with Iori. Yasohachi didn't want to trouble her and they would gather attention if he walked around with Iori, who was the daughter a samurai family. Kisuke would probably be surprised and on guard.

When Yasohachi was about to go in, he felt somebody's gaze on him.

He looked up and saw a man – a man he knew.

The man was tall, with a bamboo hat on his head. It was the man Yasohachi had spoken to yesterday at the bridge.

'Ah!' exclaimed Yasohachi.

The man looked away and briskly walked off.

Had he had an errand at the shop? Or – well, thinking about that now was pointless. Yasohachi went under the curtain.

'Hello.'

When Yasohachi went inside, Kisuke looked up from organising the shelves.

He looked even paler than he had before.

'Yasohachi-san, correct?'

'Yes.'

'How was it?' asked Kisuke. His face was clearly expectant.

It made it very hard for Yasohachi to say that nothing had changed. He was wondering what to say when a woman came out from the back.

She was probably about forty. She had good posture and a dignified face.

'A customer?' the woman asked Kisuke.

'No, I asked him for advice about the ghost the other night...' responded Kisuke.

The woman sighed. 'Are you still talking about that? You just saw a nightmare.' She spoke firmly, just as her appearance suggested.

'No, I definitely saw the ghost,' Kisuke insisted, but the woman did not back down.

'You probably mistook a dog or something.'

'There's no way I did that. It was definitely human. And it came into the house.'

Kisuke looked at the woman pleadingly, but the woman just snorted. 'You were probably just half asleep. It's because you always stay out drinking until late at night. Good thing it was a ghost – a robber would have killed you.'

After that speech, Kisuke opened his mouth to speak, but in the end, he held in his words with slumped shoulders.

'More importantly, have you seen Ohisa?' the woman asked.

'I think she was here just earlier...'

'Did she sneak off to see that man again?'

'I don't...' Kisuke stopped speaking, looking bitter.

Though Yasohachi didn't know the details, it was clear that the woman was irritated about something.

'Honestly. There's no helping it. I'm going out to deliver something, so I'll leave the rest to you,' the woman said briskly. She picked up a cloth parcel and stepped out.

She was a very vigorous woman.

'The wife of the owner,' said Kisuke with a wry smile.

'Is that so?'

'She wasn't so crabby before... but she's been like this ever since the owner disappeared...'

'Did something happen to her husband?'

'I don't know. It was ten years ago. He just left one day. There was a rumour that he had a woman somewhere.'

Kisuke scratched his head, looking like he wasn't sure what to say.

'She must have had to work very hard.'

'She did, definitely. She acts strong so that nobody underestimates her.'

'I see.'

'Well, recently, it seems her daughter found a man, so she's probably irritated about that too.'

'Why would she be irritated about an engagement?'

'Because the man's some nobody that just came by recently. It makes sense for her to be tense,' said Kisuke.

Yasohachi nodded and looked around the shop. It was fairly old, but it was well maintained.

Perhaps the owner's wife was so frantic in protecting the store because she was waiting for her husband to return.

'So how was it?' asked Kisuke, surprising Yasohachi. He had almost forgotten his point because of the owner's wife's vigour.

Yasohachi turned towards Kisuke. 'Actually...'

Though he wasn't sure whether he should tell Kisuke that Ukikumo had refused or keep quiet, he decided to keep quiet for now.

He had decided to investigate on his own – he would get Ukikumo to help somehow afterwards.

'Kisuke-san, do you remember the ghost's face?' asked Yasohachi.

'Eh?' Kisuke cocked his head. It was natural for him to be surprised at such a sudden question.

'First, we will investigate the identity of the ghost.'

'What? Does it matter who the ghost is?' Kisuke looked doubtful.

Yasohachi probably would have looked the same if he hadn't met Ukikumo.

'Yes. The ghost is wandering this world because of some attachment it has – if we understand what it is, we can exorcise the spirit.'

'Oh, that's how it works?' Kisuke nodded in admiration.

'That's why I'd like you to describe the ghost to me. Just what you remember is fine. I'm going to paint the ghost's portrait and ask around.'

Kisuke's expression clouded over. 'Ah... I think he was a thin old man... but I can't remember much.' Kisuke put his hand on the back of his neck, looking apologetic.

It probably wasn't that he had drunk too much and forgotten. He had probably been too afraid to look at the ghost's face properly.

That said, Yasohachi couldn't back down now.

'I don't mind. Just tell me what you remember.'

He didn't have to paint the portrait exactly. If he found out any particular characteristics, they should be enough to find out the identity of the ghost.

'If that's so...' responded Kisuke in a very unreliable one.

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Yasohachi ambled along with the portrait.

Kisuke's memory was less reliable than Yasohachi had thought it would be.

A thin old man with eyes like black holes. That was all Yasohachi had managed to get out of him. He had drawn many different examples for Kisuke like he had done with Iori, but Kisuke had been no help.

Yasohachi had painted a portrait, but it wasn't likely somebody would be able to tell who it was.

'What to do...' Yasohachi murmured just as thunder roared. The clouds looked like they might bring a storm.

It would probably rain in the evening –

Yasohachi had thought he would do things himself if Ukikumo wouldn't help, but he was at a complete loss.

At this right, Kisuke might actually be cursed to death.

–Now, what to do?

Probably the only thing he could do was try to convince Ukikumo again.

Yasohachi was thinking as he walked, but before he'd noticed, he had reached the aforementioned estate.

It had probably been abandoned for a while. The garden was overgrown, the door out of the frame, the pillars

slanted and the roof mossy.

Behind it, there was a swamp.

Weeds grew over the water. It was dark with mud and had a fishy smell.

'Ah!'

Yasohachi yelped without thinking.

He had spotted a man standing by the swamp, peering down at the water.

Though his back was facing Yasohachi, he recognised the man. He was tall and wore a bamboo hat. It was the third time he'd met him –

It couldn't be just a coincidence.

'Excuse me...'

Yasohachi walked up to the man and called out, which made the man shudder in surprise and turn around hesitantly.

When the man's eyes met his, he let out an 'Ah!' – he seemed to have recognised Yasohachi.

'Why are you here?' Yasohachi asked.

The man turned on his heels and dashed off.

Yasohachi tried to catch him, but the man was too fast. It felt like he had just slipped out of Yasohachi's fingers.

After Yasohachi sighed, a raindrop fell on his cheek. Then, the rain came pouring down in the blink of an eye. It was a storm.

Yasohachi ran to hide from the rain under the estate's eaves.

The sky lit up with lightning and the roar of thunder.

It was an evening shower and would probably end soon, but he would have to hide from the rain here for a while.

– This really has been quite a day.

Yasohachi sighed and peered inside the estate absentmindedly through a gap between the door.

It was too dark to see.

There was another flash of lightning.

For just a moment, the estate lit up enough for Yasohachi to see a wall scroll.

It was just a moment, but he saw a painting on the scroll.

– That painting.

Yasohachi, led by a hunch, slowly opened the door.

The room became brighter, just faintly.

There really was a wall scroll with a painting there. Yasohachi recognised the style.

He decided to step inside.

He felt like each step sank into the floor – perhaps the tatami was rotten.

He walked up to the wall scroll.

He stared at the painting in the door.

It was an absolutely ominous painting.

There was a lake with blooming water lilies. From inside the lake, a thin old man reached out with arms like branches of a dead tree, trying to crawl out.

The man's face was deathly pale and expressionless. His eyes were as dark as holes. Despite that, there was an incredible force emanating from him, like he could crawl out of the painting at any moment.

Yasohachi felt only one emotion as he looked at this painting – terror.

Yasohachi checked the painter's seal in the bottom right of the painting. Though it was covered with dust, he could read the name.

'Kanou Yuuzan – '

Yasohachi read the name aloud.

At the same time, a shudder ran through his body. His body was probably cold from the rain, but it wasn't just that.

Yasohachi had met Kanou Yuuzan before.

He wasn't just a painter. Kanou Yuuzan was a shaman who used curses to control people's hearts and killed people without dirtying his own hands.

The story about this estate that Yasohachi had heard from Shintarou flashed through his mind.

Shinzaemon had gone mad after his wife fell ill and killed his wife and the doctor?

Could that have been Kanou Yuuzan's work?

It had to be. That was why Ukikumo had refused the case – he'd known.

He had warned Yasohachi to not get involved if he didn't want to die.

Despite that, Yasohachi had carelessly involved himself and brought himself to Kanou Yuuzan's painting.

His eyes were ringing. It was hard to breathe.

This room was filled with Kanou Yuuzan's curse.

Yasohachi ran out of the estate. The rain came down hard on his body.

He tried to run home, but he had only taken a few steps when the mud caught him and he fell forward.

Huge raindrops hit the swamp loudly.

The smell – the smell of the swamp seemed to eat away at Yasohachi's heart.

– I need to run.

That thought forced Yasohachi back up.

Suddenly, he saw something like a dark shadow in the middle of the swamp.

– What is that?

He squinted but he couldn't see well in the rain.

The sky lit up with lightning. There was a roar of thunder.

The white light lit up a man –

A man stood in the middle of the swamp.

Yasohachi couldn't breathe. What was that? Was that the ghost Kisuke saw? Was that something brought about by Kanou Yuuzan's curse?

Yasohachi tried to back away in his confusion, but his back hit something.

Did he walk into a tree? No, there was no tree there. He tried to turn around, but before he could, something hit him in the back.

The force made Yasohachi fall forward. He tried to get back up, but he slipped and hit the ground again.

Before he'd noticed, he found himself sitting by the swamp.

Yasohachi tried to get up, but something cold touched him.

When Yasohachi looked down, he was shocked.

It was a person's hand.

A thin hand, like a branch from a dead tree –

It had come out of the swamp and had a hold on Yasohachi's ankle.

It was like something black had crawled out of the swamp, just like in Kanou Yuuzan's painting.

'Agh!'

Yasohachi tried to run, but he lost his footing.

He didn't even have time to think before he fell into the swamp.

He frantically struggled, but the more he did, the deeper his body sank.

The fishy, muddy water went down his throat.

He couldn't breathe. Soon, he lost the power to struggle and sank deep into the swamp.

– I will not forgive you.

As Yasohachi's consciousness faded, he heard the hoarse voice of an old man.

It was humid and hot. It felt hard to breathe.

Sweat dripped down his forehead and neck, but it was quick to dry.

His fingertips touched something cold.

He couldn't see. He couldn't see anything. But he could tell that it was a person's hand.

It felt like his heart was melting away.

There was the sound of a cat mewing.

He heard the sound of water boiling.

He felt like somebody was calling his name. It was a beautiful voice – refreshing, like it was washing away all the dirt from his heart.

– Who could it be?

As he pondered, he spotted a light in this pitch-black world.

He felt like he wouldn't be able to return if he went to the light.

The anxiety in his chest turned into fear. His body shook. The hand his fingers were touching suddenly grabbed his tightly, as if it had sensed the change in his state of mind.

He clutched the hand back.

– Yasohachi-san.

He heard the voice again. It was clearer than before.

Yasohachi opened his eyes, as if led by the voice. Bright light flooded his vision, disorienting him.

– Where on earth am I?

He didn't know where he was, but he felt very at ease as he held this hand.

'Wake up already!'

A sudden voice woke Yasohachi up at once.

At the same time, a series of images flooded his mind and he sat right up.

After a vicious bout of dizziness, Yasohachi had to press the corners of his eyes in the pain. He could hear his body creak.

He had just taken a deep breath when somebody rubbed his back.

'Are you all right?'

'Yes – '

As Yasohachi turned around, he saw a face he recognized in his blurry vision.

'I-Iori-san!' Yasohachi exclaimed in surprise.

Iori sighed and smiled gently.

'Thank goodness. For a while, I wasn't sure how things would turn out.'

Iori's eyes were slightly wet as she said that.

Yasohachi finally realised that it was Iori's hand he had been clasping and hurriedly let go.

Even if he had been confused, it was far too presumptuous of him –

'S-sorry.'

After Yasohachi made his apology, Iori shook her head and said, 'It's fine,' her cheeks a bit pink.

Yasohachi was starting to understand the situation.

He was in a small wooden room. He was sleeping on a thin futon.

At the same time, a number of questions came to him.

Why was Iori here? Where was this place anyway? He had fallen into a swamp – what on earth had happened?

'Get a grip already.'

A fist fell on his head.

Yasohachi saw Ukikumo in his usual hakama-less white kimono looking down at Yasohachi in a disgruntled manner.

'Ukikumo-san... Why?' asked Yasohachi.

Ukikumo snorted and sat down cross-legged.

'Honestly. I told you not to do anything unnecessary...'

Ukikumo poured rice wine from his gourd into a cup and gulped it down.

Ukikumo had told Yasohachi that. Yasohachi had not listened to him – he'd gone investigating and fallen into the swamp as a result.

'Why am I here?' asked Yasohachi. Then, the door opened and Koishikawa Souten appeared.

Koishikawa and Yasohachi had met on a previous incident involving spirits. He was young and looked unreliable, but he was a doctor at a clinic.

This meant Yasohachi was probably at Koishikawa's clinic.

'It appears you've woken up,' said Koishikawa gently. He swiftly confirmed Yasohachi's vitals.

'It looks like you're fine,' said Koishikawa afterwards with a nod.

'Um... What on earth happened to me?' Yasohachi asked Koishikawa.

'Fortunately, somebody had been passing by when you were drowning in the swamp, and that person brought you here,' explained Koishikawa, which brought another question to Yasohachi's mind.

Practically nobody passed by that area, and it had been pouring.

'Who was it?' asked Yasohachi.

Koishikawa cocked his head. 'That's the strange thing...'

'Strange?'

'Yes, after bringing you here, this person immediately ran off without giving a name.'

'I see...'

Even though it was something that was worth owning up to – did the person not like getting involved in troublesome things? Or was there a reason they didn't want to give a name?

Though Yasohachi was glad to have been saved, he felt unsettled.

'Iori-san just happened to be picking up some medicine when you were brought here, so she has been at your bedside since,' added Koishikawa.

'Iori-san...' said Yasohachi in surprise. He turned to face Iori, who was smiling.

'No, last night, your older sister Osayo-san was here. She's sleeping in the next room now.'

Iori glanced at the door.

'I see...'

Yasohachi looked at the door too and sighed.

It seemed like he had worried his sister Osayo as well.

'Iori-san was the one who told Osayo-san what happened. She told Ukikumo-san as well,' explained Koishikawa.

It seemed he had put many people to a lot of trouble.

'Thank you very much. I sincerely apologise for all the trouble I have caused.'

Yasohachi sat up properly and bowed.

He was only able to talk like this now because of everyone's aid.

'You should, idiot!' shouted Ukikumo.

His red eyes glared at Yasohachi. Everyone here knew about Ukikumo's red eyes, so he wasn't covering them with a cloth now.

It made sense for Ukikumo to speak like that, and Yasohachi acknowledged that he was an idiot, but Yasohachi had things he wanted to say too.

'But I couldn't leave Kisuke-san alone,' said Yasohachi, which made Ukikumo snort.

'You like meddling in everything, don't you?' Ukikumo poured rice wine from his gourd into a cup and gulped it down.

'Perhaps, but...'

'You're an odd guy,' interrupted Ukikumo.

'What's odd about me?'

'You look quiet, but you're stubborn and rash. Even though you can't do anything on your own, you insist on meddling in everyone else's problems.'

'Is that so?'

Yasohachi admitted to not being able to do anything, but he wasn't that stubborn and he didn't think he was rash.

'And you don't understand yourself either.'

Ukikumo poked Yasohachi in the forehead.'

'That hurts.'

It didn't really hurt, but Yasohachi glared at Ukikumo anyway.

'You're an idiot that causes so much trouble, but for some reason, Hachi, people gather around you –'

Ukikumo muttered this last sentence and then stood up with the staff he had been holding under his arm.

Ukikumo seemed almost sublime in the faint light as he stood.

'Fine. I'll exorcise the spirit haunting the swamp for you.' Ukikumo smirked.

'Really?'

So much had happened, but if Ukikumo would help, Yasohachi would feel reassured.

'I'd be bothered if you did something half-baked and died.'

'Are you concerned about me?'

'Of course not.'

'But...'

'I can see ghosts. It'd be annoying to have you hanging around all the time after you died.'

'I wouldn't follow you around if I died.'

'Who knows.' Ukikumo smiled mockingly.

Though the man was fickle and terrible with women and money among other things, when Ukikumo smiled, it was strangely relieving.

'Shall we get going then?'

Ukikumo hit the ground with his metal staff.

He recovered quickly thanks to Osayo and Iori, who had watched over him, but quite some time passed during his trip back home and the sky was already tinged vermillion.

'What is Ukikumo-san thinking?' asked Iori as she stood beside Yasohachi.

Yasohachi had said he'd be fine alone, but Iori had insisted on coming.

She probably felt like Yasohachi had fallen into the swamp because she had not gone with him yesterday.

She was in hakama and had her wooden sword – it was clear she intended to protect Yasohachi.

Yasohachi knew very well Iori's skill with the sword. He felt comforted knowing she would protect him, but he felt pathetic for needing that protection.

'I don't know, but I think we can trust him,' said Yasohachi with a nod, saying it more to himself than anything.

Ukikumo had told him to go to Kuraya.

Yasohachi had explained everything that happened yesterday to Ukikumo.

After thinking for a while, Ukikumo had told Yasohachi to go to Kuraya and take a certain person to the swamp.

He had spoken with confidence, like he understood everything.

'You really trust him, don't you?' Iori smiled happily.

'Yes,' Yasohachi responded immediately.

Ukikumo was always drinking and he was a miser with sticky fingers.

It might seem like there was nothing good about him, but he was an excellent exorcist.

Of course, that wasn't all.

He was a man as had to get a hold of as a cloud. There was strong emotion in his heart.

'Let's go,' Yasohachi told Iori, and he went under the curtain.

Kisuke was arranging a shelf like he had been yesterday. There was one other person there too. A woman was sweeping the floor.

Though she had a quiet air to her, her face looked similar to the owner's wife.

Perhaps this was her daughter Ohisa.

'You're fine?'

When Kisuke noticed Yasohachi, he looked like he had seen a ghost.

He should have been told that Yasohachi had fallen into the swamp. There had been the incident with Daijirou – that was probably why he was so shocked.

'Yes, thanks to everyone – '

'Thank goodness.'

'Luckily, a passerby saved me.'

'Did a – did a ghost try to kill you?' asked Kisuke, his voice hitching.

'I don't remember...' replied Yasohachi, scratching his head.

He remembered that a hand like a dead branch had grabbed him and dragged him into the swamp, but Ukikumo said that spirits had no physical body, so they wouldn't be able to drag anyone.

It made Yasohachi think it might have been an illusion.

Putting aside whether his foot had been grabbed or not, he was certain that he had heard an old man's voice say 'I will not forgive you' as he passed out.

That voice filled with hatred still rang in his ears now.

'Is that so? It has to be a ghost though. It's the same as what happened to Daijirou-san,' said Kisuke hotly.

The woman cleaning the floor seemed exasperated as she watched him.

'Excuse me, but is that...' said Yasohachi.

'That's Ohisa-san,' replied Kisuke.

So she really was the daughter of the owner's wife.

'Is that the rumoured exorcist?' asked Kisuke, looking at Iori.

Yasohachi introduced Iori, but he couldn't explain why the daughter of the samurai family Hagiwara was with a townsperson like Yasohachi, so the atmosphere became strange. That said, he didn't have the time to worry about that.

He hadn't come to chat.

'Actually, I need to talk to you...' said Yasohachi. Just as he did, Ohisa silently went to the back. Yasohachi hurriedly called out to her. 'Excuse me, but I'd like you to hear this as well, Ohisa-san.'

'Me...?' said Ohisa in a faint voice. She looked very suspicious.

It made sense for her to be, but Yasohachi had to get her to hear this.

He wouldn't be able to say why. Ukikumo had given him instructions.

'Please.'

Yasohachi bowed his head. Ohisa looked troubled, but she turned to face him again.

It looked like she would listen.

'It's about the ghost, isn't it?' asked Kisuke.

'Yes. It's very important...'

Just as Yasohachi said that, the owner's wife came into the shop.

She had a cloth bag – she had probably just come back from an errand.

'Hello,' said Yasohachi.

'The person from yesterday...' said the owner's wife. It looked like she remembered him. 'Are you talking about ghosts again?' she asked Kisuke in exasperation.

Kisuke looked away, seeming uncomfortable.

Yasohachi could tell that the owner's wife didn't think much of this spiritual incident, but he still had to talk.

'Actually, I'd like to talk about that...'

'To me?' The owner's wife's eyes went wide.

'Yes. I'd like everyone to hear this.'

'I don't know what this is about, but I don't believe in ghosts. It's just make-believe.'

'It's not make-believe. There are ghosts,' Yasohachi insisted firmly.

He hadn't believed in them himself before meeting Ukikumo, but after experiencing many incidents with spirits, he knew that they definitely existed.

'Even if they do, it's got nothing to do with my business.'

It looked like the owner's wife was a very practical person.

'Please just listen.'

'I'm busy.'

The owner's wife waved a hand at him and went to the back.

Iori was the one to call out to her.

'This incident with the ghost has something to do with this shop.'

Iori's words made the owner's wife stop.

When the owner's wife turned around slowly, there was suspicion on her face.

'What do you mean?'

Her brows were furrowed and her head was tilted to one side.

Yasohachi had thought that Iori was answer, but she kept her mouth shut and looked at Yasohachi. It looked like she was asking him to continue.

Yasohachi nodded and looked straight at the owner's wife.

'I heard that your husband went missing about ten years ago.'

'What about it?'

'This incident has something to do with your husband's whereabouts.'

Of course, these weren't Yasohachi's words.'

Ukikumo had said this. If the people at Kuraya didn't want to come, tell them this.

Yasohachi didn't know if it was true or not.

'What are you saying? Are you telling me that ghost is my husband?'

The owner's wife's eyes wavered slightly.

Yasohachi didn't know if the emotion there was sadness or anger, but it was clear that something within her had moved.

'That's impossible,' said Kisuke in a hoarse voice. His shaking jaw made his voice shake too. 'I saw the ghost's face. That wasn't the boss's face.'

If Kisuke, who had seen the ghost, said it wasn't true, that was probably the case.

'I just said it was related – I didn't say that the ghost was the owner,' said Yasohachi.

The owner's wife's brows furrowed again. 'Then how is it related?'

Yasohachi couldn't reply. He didn't know. Yasohachi hadn't heard the details from Ukikumo either.

'I don't know the details either, but...'

'What?'

'It is definitely related. I apologise for the trouble, but please come with me – '

Yasohachi bowed from the waist.

After a while – he didn't know how long – he heard the owner's wife let out a sigh.

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When Yasohachi and the others reached the swamp, Ukikumo was already there.

In the dark, he wore his usual white kimono without hakama, tied with a red cloth at his waist. Standing there with his metal staff, he looked just like a ghost.

Ukikumo, who was an exorcist, always had a strange air about him.

Even though he was alive, it felt like he was already dead – somebody standing between the two worlds.

That was how Yasohachi felt.

'Who's that?' asked Kisuke from behind him.

'Ukikumo-san, the exorcist.'

'So he's...' Kisuke gulped, perhaps afraid of Ukikumo.

'What have you brought us here for?' asked the owner's wife. Her daughter Ohisa stood beside her, and Iori was there as well.

'We will exorcise the spirit,' said Yasohachi, which made the owner's wife frown.

'I'm not possessed or anything. Kisuke's the one who saw the ghost.'

The owner's wife's comment made sense.

Yasohachi was thinking the same thing. Why had Ukikumo asked him to bring along the owner's wife and daughter instead of just Kisuke?

'You just haven't noticed. You're possessed too,' said Ukikumo.

Though he had his back to them, it seemed like he was listening properly.

'What do you mean?' asked the owner's wife.

Ukikumo slowly turned around.

He had a red cloth covering his red eyes. The eyes drawn in ink on the cloth stared eerily at them.

Kisuke and Ohisa both let out yelps upon seeing those eyes.

The owner's wife just managed to keep quiet, but she had her hand on her mouth in shock.

'There's a spirit haunting this swamp.'

Ukikumo pointed at the swamp with his staff.

The curtain of night had fallen. The moon was reflected on the surface of the black swamp.

'T-there really is a ghost then. Please exorcise it quickly.' Kisuke shook in fear and clung to Ukikumo.

Ukikumo looked at Kisuke with the eyes on his cloth and then shook him away.

Kisuke fell onto the mud and looked up at Ukikumo in shock. He probably hadn't thought he would be treated so roughly.

'Ukikumo-san!'

That was just too awful. Kisuke was still their client, after all.

Ukikumo ignored Yasohachi's protest. He put his staff on his shoulder, took the gourd from his waist and drank rice wine straight from it.

'Hachi, when you were drowning in the swamp, you heard a man's voice – that's what you said, right?'

Ukikumo turned the eyes drawn on his blindfold towards him.

Yasohachi stopped breathing for a moment. He wasn't afraid of Ukikumo's red eyes, but the inked eyes on the blindfold frightened him somehow.

'Yes.'

'What did he say?'

"“I will not forgive you.”"

After Yasohachi responded, Ukikumo nodded in satisfaction. 'Now, who can't the ghost haunting the swamp forgive? What can't he forgive?' he asked, looking around.

'That doesn't matter. Just exorcise it already. You're an exorcist, right?'

Kisuke must have been fairly displeased about being pushed away earlier. He stood up and spoke in a rough manner.

However, Ukikumo wouldn't be bothered by something of that level.

'My exorcisms are a bit different from everyone else's, you see...'

'They're all the same, aren't they?' said Kisuke, flaring up.

'They're not. I don't use talismans or sutras. I find out why the spirit is wandering and take away that reason. That's how I exorcise spirits – '

Ukikumo drank more rice wine from his gourd.

'What are you saying? Can you really exorcise a spirit while drinking that much?' complained Kisuke.

Ukikumo ignored him and continued, 'I'll get this out of the way first. The identity of the spirit haunting the swamp is – ,

Ukikumo stopped there and walked up to the owner's wife.

'W-what?'

The owner's wife stepped back, perhaps hesitant in the face of the pressure coming from Ukikumo.

'Ten years ago – the man who went missing. Your husband, Jinzou.'

Ukikumo's words echoed through the moonlit night.

Kisuke and Ohisa were gaping in shock.

However – the owner's wife looked back at Ukikumo with the same expression she had had earlier.

There was no strength in her gaze, as if she were staring into nothingness.

'That's... I can't believe it...' said Ohisa, crying.

Yasohachi understood painfully how she felt. She had just been told that her father, who had disappeared ten years ago, was dead. She probably couldn't accept it.

'What proof do you have for saying such nonsense?' cut in Kisuke.

Ukikumo sighed and ran a hand through his long hair.

'I've got proof. Well, it'd be better to have somebody else speak instead of me.'

Ukikumo pounded the ground with his staff.

That seemed to be a sign. A yellow light appeared from the estate and approached them.

Yasohachi thought at first that it was a disembodied soul, but he was wrong. It was the light of a lantern.

The light of the lantern illuminated the people walking towards them.

It was Hijikata, walking at the front with the lantern. Behind his back, as if hiding, there was a man.

'Ah!' said Yasohachi involuntarily.

'Do you know him?' asked Iori, but Yasohachi didn't know how to respond. He only knew the man's face – he had no idea who he was.

At the bridge where Daijirou's corpse had been found. In front of Kuraya. Then, in front of the swamp. He had seen this man thrice.

'Matsukichi-san...' said Ohisa in surprise.

The man named Matsukichi had his lips in a thin line and responded with a quick bow of his head.

From that atmosphere, it felt like they were more than just acquaintances.

'What is this?' asked Yasohachi.

'Toshi, explain,' said Ukikumo.

Hijikata smiled and nodded before speaking.

'Matsukichi-san is a medicine merchant, as I am. We are old acquaintances.'

It was true that Matsukichi had been dressed like a merchant when Yasohachi first met him.

'Yes,' responded Matsukichi in a hoarse voice.

'I think you may have sensed this already, but Matsukichi-san and Ohisa-san are in a romantic relationship.'

– I see.

Kisuke had mentioned that Ohisa was in a relationship with somebody. So that person was Matsukichi.

But why had Matsukichi been brought here?

No. Matsukichi had been suspicious from the beginning. Yasohachi had met with him many times while investigating this spiritual phenomenon.

'This person...' said Yasohachi, but Ukikumo covered his mouth.

It seemed he was telling him not to say anything unnecessary. Yasohachi didn't like it, but all he could do now was leave things to Ukikumo.

'Matsukichi, could you tell us? Why did Jinzou die?'

Ukikumo looked at Matsukichi with the eyes on his blindfold.

Matsukichi's eyes flickered about for a while, but he seemed to find resolve within himself, as he began to speak in a heavy tone.

'Jinzou-san was killed by the master of that estate, Fukami Shinzaemon.'

Matsukichi pointed at the old estate lit up by the moon.

Everyone followed the finger with their gazes.

'What do you mean, killed?' asked Iori.

'Shinzaemon was a man who was loose with money. He borrowed money from many people. One of those people was Jinzou-san,' Matsukichi said, voice haltering. 'One day, Jinzou-san came round to ask Shinzaemon for his money back. As a result of this argument...'

Though Matsukichi said nothing else, everyone there understood what he was suggesting.

Shinzaemon had probably lost his temper and killed Jinzou.

'Then what happened?' asked Yasohachi.

Matsukichi gripped his hands into tight fists and continued, 'Shinzaemon disposed of Jinzou-san's body in the swamp behind the estate and acted like nothing had happened.'

Matsukichi pointed at the dark swamp.

The wind was blowing, making the grass growing around the swamp rustle.

'Why...'

Ohisa had collapsed to the floor. She probably couldn't bear with the sudden truth.

It looked like Matsukichi wanted to run up to Ohisa, but he bit his lip and stopped.

It was like he was telling himself he couldn't touch her.

'Why do you know that, Matsukichi-san?' asked Iori.

That was a good question. Why would Matsukichi know the truth that Shinzaemon had hidden? Yasohachi looked to Ukikumo for an answer.

'Tell them, Matsukichi,' said Ukikumo.

Matsukichi gulped.

Yasohachi didn't know the circumstances, but it was clear that Matsukichi wasn't sure whether he should tell them or not.

Matsukichi groaned and looked down.

Hijikata placed a hand on Matsukichi's shoulder and whispered something in his ear. Yasohachi didn't know what he said, but whatever it was, it made Matsukichi draw up resolve. His expression changed.

'I am Shinzaemon's son – '

Matsukichi's sudden words made the air freeze.

Yasohachi and Iori were shocked, as was expected, but Kisuke's cheek was twitching too, and Ohisa was dumbfounded, her eyes wide.

However, the owner's wife just looked at Matsukichi with narrowed eyes.

'What on earth?' said Yasohachi, unable to keep it in.

Matsukichi seemed to have used all his strength to say that. His shoulders were slumped.

Hijikata spoke up in his stead. 'Matsukichi-san was watching when Jinzou-san was killed, but he hadn't been able to

say anything. At the time, Matsukichi-san was just twelve. It makes sense.'

It was just as Hijikata said.

He couldn't blame Matsukichi. If Yasohachi had been in the same situation, he wouldn't have been able to say or do anything to stop it.

'Matsukichi-san hated his father for acting like nothing had happened and left the Fukami family afterwards. It is impossible to think of how difficult it must have been for the son of a vassal to find their own way in the world at such a young age – '

Hijikata patted Matsukichi on the back comfortingly.

Though Yasohachi couldn't imagine, it must have been very difficult.

Matsukichi had suffered, but he didn't want to live with his father, who had killed someone. That was how kind a person he was.

'Matsukichi-san went to many places and returned to Edo as a medicine merchant after ten years,' finished Hijikata.

Ukikumo, staff on his shoulders, walked up to Ohisa.

'When Matsukichi returned, his family line had come to an end.'

– That's right!

Shintarou had told Yasohachi about the terrible events that had occurred at the Fukami household.

'What on earth happened?' asked Yasohachi.

Ukikumo looked bitter. 'You saw Kanou Yuuzan's painting at the estate, right?'

'Yes.'

Yasohachi had seen it. It was a horrible and terrifying painting of a man crawling out of a lake.

'Then you should know. Kanou Yuuzan used the incident with Jinzou to put an end to the Fukami family.'

– So that's what happened.

Shintarou had made it sound like Shinzaemon's family had quite a lot of power, so somebody who thought that unpleasant had probably consulted Kanou Yuuzan.

Kanou Yuuzan played with people's hearts and tricked them into hating and killing each other.

Shinzaemon had probably lost himself due to Kanou Yuuzan's curse and killed his wife and the doctor.

Though Yasohachi hadn't seen it, he could imagine the scene in his mind. It made him want to vomit.

'When Matsukichi came back to Edo, he had two goals. One was to check up on his family, and the other – '

Ukikumo looked at Ohisa, who was sitting down.

' – was to apologise.'

'Eh?' Ohisa looked up.

'Matsukichi-san wanted to apologise to you for what his father did ten years ago and for being unable to do anything,' said Hijikata, unusually gentle.

Ohisa slowly stood up and looked at Matsukichi with wet eyes.

'But Matsukichi-san fell in love with Ohisa-san. He must have been in so much pain,' said Iori.

Her expression was a bit different from usual. Yasohachi couldn't explain it well, but if he had to say, it was a face that reminded him that she was a woman.

'Yes. Even though he knew he couldn't love her, he still did...' said Hijikata, turning his eyes to the sky.

– How tragic.

Matsukichi wasn't in the wrong, but to Ohisa, Matsukichi was the son of her father's enemy.

Even if Matsukichi knew in his head that he couldn't fall in love with her, he must have been unable to stop himself.

'Now, let's get back to the story.'

Ukikumo hit his staff against the ground.

'You understand now, right? What Jinzou can't forgive – '

Ukikumo's words echoed through Yasohachi's ears.

Jinzou probably couldn't accept Matsukichi, the son of the man who killed him, and his own daughter being together.

– I will not forgive you.

That was probably what those words meant.

Yasohachi understood how Jinzou felt, but it would be so sad if Matsukichi and Ohisa, who were in love, would have to separate because of their parents.

'Can't something be done?' asked Yasohachi.

Ukikumo smirked. 'That's up to you.'

When Ukikumo said that, his eyes were on the owner's wife.

'Eh?'

Everyone turned to look at her.

Still, the owner's wife's expression didn't change at all.

'I knew...'

That murmur shocked everyone.

'What do you mean, you knew?' asked Matsukichi, obviously shaken.

'My husband went to get his money back and did not return. Even an idiot would know what had happened.'

'...'

'But the man was the shogun's vassal. No matter what I said, nothing would change.'

Though the owner's voice spoke calmly, there was a strong anger there and frustration about the situation.

'If you went to the magistrate's, they would have investigated,' said Lori.

Lori was kind to townspeople like Yasohachi, but – no, not but, but because of that – she didn't really understand the difference between classes.

'It would have been impossible. He was the shogun's vassal. Unless it was something incredible, nobody would listen to a townsperson's plea,' said Yasohachi. He felt his heart grow cold.

There was a divide between townspeople and samurai that could not be crossed.

Even Lori, who was right next to him, felt terribly far away. Perhaps Lori had felt the same thing, as her lips were pulled into a tight frown and she looked down.

'That was why I gave up. My husband would not return. I would protect the store. I wouldn't be able to bear with the situation unless I did.'

The owner's wife smiled slightly.

Perhaps Yasohachi had been mistaken about her all along. Though she acted cool, it was because she had the strength to keep moving forward.

'I apologise –'

Matsukichi bowed his head. It felt like he had been able to bear saying nothing.

'Don't apologise. It makes everything seem worse –'

'But...'

'This must be some sort of fate... I can't believe that Shinzaemon's son would fall in love with Ohisa...'

'I...'

The owner's wife went to stand in front of Ukikumo. Her eyes were strong, unlike they had been earlier. It looked like she was already determined.

'Is my husband here?' she asked.

Ukikumo pointed at the side of the swamp with his staff.

'He's standing right there.'

'I see,' the owner's wife responded. She walked up to where Ukikumo had pointed.

'Dear, you're there, right?'

She began to speak, but there was no response. She continued regardless.

'You loaned him money and were killed for it. You must be so angry –'

The grass around the swamp rustled.

'But why not leave that anger with the person who actually did it? If you keep wandering around here with your hate,

this time Ohisa will end up hating you.'

The owner's wife's words were refreshing and filled with kindness.

'So let's leave it at that. Why not wish for Ohisa's happiness? That's what parents do – '

As she finished, tears fell from her eyes.

Even though she had said she'd given up earlier, but she probably hadn't truly meant it. Her heart had to be in disorder.

Still, the owner's wife wished for her daughter Ohisa to be happy.

As if in response to her words, there was the sound of the wind.

'He's gone,' Ukikumo said quietly, his eyes following something through the sky.

For a while, it was silent, but then Matsukichi and Ohisa walked up to the owner's wife, who was still standing by the swamp.

'If you are truly sorry, please carry on our store,' said the owner's wife.

Matsukichi fell to his knees and said 'Thank you' over and over again while crying.

Ohisa rubbed Matsukichi's back to comfort him.

– Ah, everything's over now.

That feeling grew within Yasohachi's heart.

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'Not yet!'

Yasohachi had thought that things had come to a conclusion, but then he realised that there was something big that still hadn't been solved.

'What do you mean?' asked Iori, confused.

Yasohachi had been relieved like Iori until just earlier, but there was still the original problem.

'Who killed Daijirou-san?' asked Yasohachi.

Ukikumo gave him an obscene smile.

It was like he was saying that he had known from the start.

'It's simple. Daijirou's death and Jinzou's ghost have nothing to do with each other at all.'

'Eh?'

Yasohachi was shocked.

That didn't add up at all. Kisuke had seen a ghost at the swamp with Daijirou. Had Daijirou been killed at random for reasons completely unrelated to the ghost?

'There was a rumour about a ghost around here for a while, which is why nobody would come by. There are no houses near either. Somebody used that for their own purposes.'

Ukikumo put his staff on his shoulder and looked at Kisuke.

Kisuke gulped and took two steps back, as if afraid of the eyes drawn on Ukikumo's blindfold.

'What do you mean? Please explain properly,' interrupted Yasohachi in confusion.

'This estate has become a hideaway for robbers thieving in the area.'

Ukikumo pointed at the estate with his staff.

The estate had an uncanny air to it. It seemed even more uncanny since something terrible had happened here before.

'Hideaway?'

'Yes, and Daijirou was one of those robbers,' explained Hijikata. He had been completely unnoticeable until just now, but now he had a dangerous air to him.

'W-what are you saying?'

Yasohachi didn't understand the situation, which made his words come up rough.

'Daijirou probably got into a fight with his friends about how to split shares or something and as killed for it,' Hijikata said coolly.

'Please wait a second. How about the ghost Kisuke-san saw?'

'Try to remember. Hachi, you tried to draw a portrait of the ghost, right? What did Kisuke say then?' said Ukikumo, walking up to Kisuke.

Kisuke had said he couldn't remember clearly then, but the ghost wandering the swamp was Jinzou.

It would have been unnatural for Kisuke to see Jinzou's face and not know it was him.

'What's going on?' asked Yasohachi.

Kisuke furrowed his brows.

'There's nothing going on. I saw the ghost and it was somebody I didn't know.'

Had Kisuke seen a different ghost? Yasohachi tried to believe him, but it was no use. Suspicion that had sprouted was hard to weed out.

'How long are you going to keep playing dumb for?'

Ukikumo smirked.

It was a frightening smile that gave Yasohachi shivers.

'I'm not playing dumb.'

'You're no good at lying. That's why you ended up cornering yourself.'

'So Kisuke-san lied about seeing a ghost?' said Yasohachi.

Ukikumo nodded. 'After he killed Daijirou, he wasn't sure what to do with the corpse. That's when he decided to pretend a ghost did it. The reason he moved it to the bridge was because he was afraid the estate would be investigated.'

'Then...'

'Kisuke had been seen drinking with Daijirou at Marukuma. He didn't want people to think he was the culprit, so he started talking about how he'd seen a ghost.'

'But that was a mistake...'

'Yup. Kumakichi and you both like to meddle. Even though Kisuke didn't want any of it, you two keep talking about exorcising spirits.'

Ukikumo shrugged.

'Then the reason I fell in the swamp...'

'It was probably Kisuke. You were in the way. If he pushed you into the swamp and you drowned, then more people would believe in the ghost. Two birds, one stone.'

– I can't believe it.

Yasohachi had been completely tricked. No, Kisuke himself had to be confused about what to do.

Now that Yasohachi thought about it, there were many holes in the story.

'Stop joking around! Don't just say whatever you want! Me, a robber? Where's your proof? I'd like you to stop accusing people for no reason!' shouted Kisuke, waving both hands about.

However, the more he struggled, the more obvious it became. He had killed Daijirou, tried to make it seem like the worst of a ghost, and got caught in a swamp.

'Oh, you want proof? Here's proof.' Ukikumo put his face right up to Kisuke's and whispered.

Kisuke looked bewildered. Ukikumo ignored him and looked at Hijikata.

'The oil has been poured already, so it should burn well,' said Hijikata, sounding strangely amused. Then, he threw his lit lantern towards the estate.

The lantern hit the wall of the estate and fell to the floor. A fire started to burn.

Hijikata seemed to have poured oil around the estate, just as he had said.

The estate burned up, crackling away. The red light lit up the surroundings.

Kisuke just stared.

'Here it is,' murmured Ukikumo. He walked p to Hijikata. Hijikata already had a wooden sword out. Yasohachi didn't know where he had got it from.

– What's here?

Yasohachi squinted and saw five men run out of the burning estate.

The men were holding knives, daggers and clubs. They ran at Ukikumo and Hijikata at once.

'Please stop!' shouted Yasohachi.

It wasn't that he was worried about Ukikumo and Hijikata. It was the opposite.

These men didn't know. They didn't know that Ukikumo and Hijikata were incredibly skilled –

'Yah!'

Two men with swords tried to slice at Hijikata.

Hijikata swiftly evaded their attack, hit one forcefully with the wooden sword and caught the other in the torso on the return.

This was what people meant when they said lightning speed.

The two men froze for a moment and then collapsed, showing the whites of their eyes.

Ukikumo spun his staff above his head and mowed down the three remaining men.

They fell to their knees, groaning.

– Like I said.

Yasohachi looked at the owner's wife standing by the swamp. She looked shocked.

Five men had been defeated in a moment. It made sense for her to be surprised.

In any case, this was the end of it –

'Damn it!'

Yasohachi had just relaxed when he heard a shout.

It was Kisuke –

He had a short sword in his hand – he must have had it concealed. Then, he attacked Iori.

Perhaps he had thought that he'd be able to win against a woman. He had probably meant to use Iori as a hostage to escape.

However, there was a huge flaw in his plan.

Iori cut him down with her wooden blade before Kisuke even had the time to attack.

Kisuke fainted. He didn't even have the time to scream.

He had chosen the wrong person to fight.

Just as Yasohachi had sighed in relief, he heard a loud noise.

He saw the Fukami estate collapsing in the fire.

Fortunately, there were no buildings nearby. It was summer, so the plants had a lot of water. The fire wouldn't

spread.

'This is really the end then.'

In the light of the red flames, Iori's smiling face looked even more beautiful than usual.

'It is – '

Yasohachi and Iori nodded at each other and then looked once more at the estate.

The connections to the past and Kanou Yuuzan's painting both burned away, rising through the sky with the smoke –

-  
epilogue

A few days afterwards, Yasohachi went to the burnt estate.

Ukikumo was with him.

He had his white kimono with no hakama as usual and a red cloth covering his eyes. He had his staff with him as well.

Though the area had seemed dark when the estate had been around, it was completely different now.

The light lit up the swamp.

With time, perhaps even this swamp would become a spring with beautiful water – that was how it felt.

When Yasohachi told Ukikumo this, he laughed.

'That estate was in a bad place.'

'Eh?'

'Because of the estate, the swamp didn't get enough light and the water got muddy. That darkness brought about bad things.'

'Does that happen?'

'That's what darkness is – '

Ukikumo looked up at the sky.

With the cries of the cicadas and the sunlight pouring down, Yasohachi could believe what Ukikumo said.

Perhaps people's hearts wouldn't grow dark under a bright sky.

'Come to think of it, what happened with the robbers?' asked Yasohachi.

'No idea,' replied Ukikumo. 'It's up to the magistrate. Nothing for an exorcist to do.'

'That's right.'

It was just as Ukikumo said.

Ukikumo's job was to exorcise spirits, not expelling robbers.

'Did you paint something this time?' asked Ukikumo.

'Yes, of course.'

Yasohachi showed the painting he had brought to Ukikumo.

Ukikumo carelessly unrolled it, pushed the red blindfold up slightly and stared.

'It's quite an odd painting,' Ukikumo said.

Yasohachi himself knew that. He had painted it a bit differently than he usually did.

It was a picture of a man cutting the black chains that bound him. It was supposed to be of Jinzou, who had cut the roots of evil to wish for his daughter's happiness.

However, Yasohachi just smiled without explaining that.

He didn't plan on letting anyone have it. It was, perhaps, a way of showing his determination – that he was different from Kanou Yuuzan, who bound people with curses.

'Are those two doing well?' asked Ukikumo as he returned the painting.

Ukikumo, no matter what he said, still cared. It was just like him.

'Yes. Matsukichi-san says that he is exhausted since he isn't used to the work yet though...'

But it was probably nothing compared to how he had suffered in the past. Perhaps Yasohachi was being too optimistic, he thought they would be able to do well.

'I see.'

Ukikumo's lips were turned up at the corners.

'By the way, I heard that Ukikumo-san was working on a different case, but how did that go?'

That was what Hijikata had said at the shrine when they met.

'It wasn't a different case.'

'Eh?'

'Toshizo was asked by Matsukichi to consult me. So it's not a different case.'

– I see.'

Matsukichi had probably heard the ghost stories about his family and consulted Hijikata, but Matsukichi had also gone around investigating himself. That was why Yasohachi had seen him so often.

Here, Yasohachi thought of something.

'Could it be that the person who saved me when I fell in the swamp was Matsukichi-san?'

'Probably.'

'Oh no, I haven't thanked him yet.'

'That's what makes you an idiot.'

'Sorry, I'm going to be right back,' Yasohachi said quickly, running off –

He glanced behind him. Ukikumo was still looking at the burnt estate.

# lautē, lautē!

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 [lautē.tumblr.com/post/144583545198/ukikumo-shinrei-kitan-novel-translation-volume-2](http://lautē.tumblr.com/post/144583545198/ukikumo-shinrei-kitan-novel-translation-volume-2)

*ukikumo shinrei kitan novel translation*

## VOLUME 2 – THE WAY OF THE DEMON SWORD

the way of the demon sword

–

prologue

–

'Damn it! They're all just making fun of me!'

The man spat out hateful words as he walked the night path.

There was a reason his anger was laid bare. The man had been in the red light district just earlier, and not as a regular guest.

He had gone to talk about paying for a certain prostitute to get out of bondage.

He had gone to seen her many times before – her name was Yuugiri.

Though she wasn't a peerless beauty, she was bright, cheerful and smart.

He had thought Yuugiri would be happy, but she had refused.

She hadn't just refused. He had been offering to set her free, but she had gone and said, 'I would not want to be your wife – '

The man had flown at Yuugiri in a rage but had been chased out by guards.

'Damn it...' he muttered, kicking the ground.

He lost his footing and fell on his behind.

– This keeps getting worse.

When the man looked up as he tried to stand, he found somebody standing right in front of him.

He was a monk. He wore a worn robe and had beads hanging from his neck.

Because he had on a bamboo hat that covered his whole face, he couldn't see his face, but the chin he could just see was very white and captivating.

'You underwent quite a trial, didn't you?' said the monk in a clear and refreshing voice.

Since the man had been in a rage, he hadn't been paying attention to his surroundings, but it seemed that this monk had seen the mess in the red-light district.

It didn't seem like he had just happened to take the same path.

'You come to laugh at me. You bastard!'

The man stood up, but the monk didn't budge. Since he couldn't see the monk's face, he couldn't even guess at what he was thinking.

'I would never laugh.'

Though the monk shook his head, his tone seemed amused.

'You're laughing, aren't you!?'

The man tried to push the monk away with both hands, but the monk easily evaded him.

It was already too late. The man lost his balance and fell forward.

He had terrible luck today.

'It's all that woman's fault...' muttered the man as he got up to sit.

He didn't care any more.

'If you want to laugh, just laugh,' he said.

The monk leant over slightly. He could just see eyes between the bamboo.

They were almond shaped, captivating like a woman's.

'I have no intention of laughing at you at all. I just – '

'You just what?'

'I just want to help you – that's all.'

'Help me?' repeated the man.

He couldn't believe that at all.

'Let me give you this.'

The monk held out a sword.

The sword was obviously expensive, in a crimson scabbard. The handle was crimson as well.

The flange had a flower pattern which also looked expensive as well.

'I don't want it,' said the man with a click of his tongue.

It was because he knew what the monk really wanted. He probably thought that if he had enough money to buy a prostitute out of bondage, he'd be able to buy a sword easily.

'Sorry, but I don't have the money for that kind of thing,' the man continued.

That was a fact. He had talked about paying to get Yuugiri out of bondage, but he didn't have the money on hand. He had thought he'd be able to do it somehow if he sold his shop and got a number of loans.

That was how much he loved Yuugiri.

Maybe Yuugiri had refused because she could tell he didn't have the ability to do it.

Thinking that made him feel even more wretched.

Even though he had thought the two of them truly understood each other, it felt like he had just realised that it was only business for her.

'I don't need money,' the monk said.

'Eh?' the man replied.

'I said that I would give it to you. I have no intention of receiving money for it.'

'You're going to give me a sword for free?'

'Yes.'

'Why?'

The man didn't understand. He didn't know much about swords, but they weren't something you'd just give away to someone you didn't know.

'I said this earlier. I want to help you.'

'Help?'

'Yes. The guards at the shop treated you terribly. Striking you so was simply immoral.'

The man's quiet words rested easily in the man's heart.

He had been mocked and laughed at – it made him happy to that somebody understood how painful it had been.

But –

'Getting a sword isn't going to help with that.'

Putting it up in his home and staring at it wouldn't cheer him up.

'That would be the case if it were a normal sword.'

'What do you mean?'

'This sword has taken much blood – an abominable demon sword – '

As the monk said that, he half-unsheathed the sword.

The blade glinted ominously in the moonlight.

The man had seen many swords before, but it was the first time he'd seen a sword so beautiful and ominous.

He could hear his heart beating loudly.

'Please take this sword. I am sure it will lighten the painful thoughts that weigh you down so.'

The monk returned the sword to the scabbard and proffered it.

The man took it in his own hands, entranced by the light from the sword –

-

Yasohachi held his breath as he watched the man sitting in front of him.

The man had a sickly thin face. His branch-like hands were on the tatami as he looked at the painting in front him.

The man's name was Machida Tenmei.

He was a painter who mostly worked on Buddhist pictures. He had used to be in the famous Kanou school of painting.

Evening approached. It had begun to grow dark. In the room of the row house, Tenmei's wide eyes seemed to have an unusual light in them.

Yasohachi could hear a baby crying. It had been crying this whole time. It was probably in the next room.

'How is it?' Yasohachi asked, leaning forward.

Tenmei was currently looking at a painting by Yasohachi.

Yasohachi's dream was to be a painter and would sometimes show Tenmei his paintings.

'This is no good...'

Tenmei sighed.

Yasohachi had painted Acala. Even though he was the one who painted it, he knew something about it wasn't put together well.

'What's wrong with it?'

Yasohachi didn't know what was missing.

'There's no strength in your paintings,' said Tenmei, tapping the painting with a finger.

'Strength?'

'It's well balanced and painted properly, but that's all. The painting doesn't plead anything. If I had to say, there's no soul in it,' said Tenmei with a critical expression.

Yasohachi didn't feel disappointed. He had expected as much. An exorcist had told him the same thing before.

'Soul...'

'Right. What did you draw?'

'Acala.'

'Acala's role is to save those who are hard to enlighten. He is in fire, standing with a sword. Above all else, there is his characteristic rage.'

'Yes,' said Yasohachi with a nod.

He had asked a monk he knew before painting.

'Look at Acala's eyes. Are these eyes full of rage?'

Tenmei pointed at the eyes of the Acala Yasohachi had painted.

'That was my intention...' said Yasohachi, shoulders slumping.

'This just makes him look displeased. Rage bubbles up from within.'

'How can I express that rage?'

'I don't know,' Tenmei said firmly.

'Eh?'

'I said I don't know. Listen. Using your head to think and working on skills will make you better, but that doesn't equate to putting your soul into something.'

'Is painting skilfully and painting well different?'

Yasohachi cocked his head.

'Yeah, they're different. This is what speaks in the end – '

Tenmei rested his fist on Yasohachi's chest.

'The heart?'

'Yes. Well, a kid like you might not be able to put your soul in a painting. Rage is definitely impossible.'

Yasohachi couldn't agree with those words.

'Why do you think that?'

'You were born in a happy family and have never suffered. You don't know rage. You can't paint without knowing something.'

Yasohachi couldn't say anything in return.

Even though Yasohachi wasn't related to his family by blood, he had been raised as the son of a dry-goods shop owner and had never experienced poverty.

Though his father Genta was a strict man, that was just his way of showing love.

His older sister Osayo was nagging but kind and had looked after Yasohachi when he was young, since he was often picked on.

He had never felt inconvenienced in his life.

It was that way even with painting. Yasohachi had a place to live and was allowed to paint as much as he wanted as he helped out at home.

This was a very blissful environment.

Tenmei lived in a small row house and lived a life where he didn't know when he'd be able to eat next.

He had to live with a crying baby next door too. It was probably impossible to focus on painting.

It was much worse than Yasohachi's environment, but Tenmei still continued to paint.

It was probably a craving that welled up from within him.

Yasohachi felt like he could clearly see his naivety.

'Then there's no way for me to paint...' said Yasohachi finally.

The baby next door was still crying like it was on fire. Tenmei glared at the wall and muttered, 'Shut up.' Then, he continued, 'You've only ever seen beautiful things. The surface. You haven't seen what's hidden at all.'

'What's hidden...'

'Yeah. The world is terrible and sad. If you don't learn about that, you'll only ever paint skilfully.'

Tenmei's words struck Yasohachi's heart.

He felt like he had just been told what he lacked.

And it was the environment he had grown up in – he didn't know how to fix that.

'I...'

Just as Yasohachi spoke, he suddenly heard a scream.

That wasn't all. Then, there was a man's angry yell and a crying child.

– What on earth?

Yasohachi and Tenmei exchanged a glance. They stood up, opened the door and looked out.

Yasohachi was shocked by what he saw.

A woman was shaking as she sat on the ground between the row houses.

It looked like she had run here in a hurry. She was barefoot and her purple kimono left her white skin exposed.

Though Yasohachi didn't know what had happened, it was clear something wasn't normal. Yasohachi tried to run up to her, but Tenmei held him back.

'You'll be killed!'

Yasohachi took a look. He saw a man going up to the woman.

He was a slightly chubby man. He wore a red speckled kimono.

His face was red with ink and his eyes were unfocussed. Saliva dripped from his half open mouth.

He let out whines like a dog as he stepped closer to the woman.

Yasohachi noticed the drawn sword in his hand.

Drip, drip – blood fell from the tip of the sword.

Yasohachi finally understood. The man's kimono did not have a red speckled pattern. That was blood.

His face was probably also bloody.

Though a crowd had gathered in no time, nobody did anything in the face of the man's strange appearance.

'Run!'

A woman ran out of the row house yelling that.

She was a young woman. She had a child in her arms. Perhaps she was an acquaintance of the woman sitting on the ground.

In response to the voice, the man looked at the woman holding the child.

The man turned to face them. Perhaps he had changed his target.

'What are you doing? Stop!'

Somebody who looked like a wandering samurai pushed his way through the crowd to stop the man.

However –

The man casually sliced with his blade.

The wandering samurai didn't have the time to draw his sword. He clutched at his arm and collapsed.

Yasohachi shuddered when he saw the blood gush out of the arm.

If he had run up earlier, he would probably have ended up like that.

That said, if they just kept watching, the woman holding the child would definitely be killed.

While Yasohachi hesitated, the man swung his sword again.

It looked almost as if black miasma was coming out of the sword.

No, that wasn't all. It looked like many people – men and women – were possessing the man.

– What is that?

The man's sword would fall on the head of the woman carrying the child – everyone must have thought that.

However, the man suddenly stopped moving.

There was a woman standing behind him. She wore a vivid pink kimono – she looked like she could be a prostitute.

This captivating and imposing woman was somebody Yasohachi had met before.

She was Tamamo.

Tamamo took the hairpin she was using in her own hair to stab the left side of the man's neck.

The sword slipped from the man's hand.

Tamamo pulled the kanzashi back. The man collapsed to his knees. He stopped moving.

As Tamamo watched him, her eyes were bewitching but cold.

Yasohachi and everyone else just stared in shock.

Then, some people who looked like detectives ran up with a red face.

'What's this fuss?'

'This man was waving a sword about. He isn't dead. He's just fainted.'

Tamamo spoke in a beautiful voice, as if there had been no fuss at all.

The detectives immediately arrested the man and took him away.

With the tension gone, everyone started making a clamour.

'That was incredible,' said Tenmei, his arms crossed.

'Yes,' replied Yasohachi, though he felt something was strange.

The sword the man had been holding – it had disappeared.

He thought that maybe the detectives had taken it, but he felt like that wasn't the case. Where had that sword gone?

Ting –

The sound of a bell interrupted Yasohachi's thoughts.

He turned around and saw a monk briskly walking away. He wore a worn robe and a bamboo hat that covered his entire head.

For some reason, that monk had a sword in a crimson scabbard in his hand.

– Could it be?

Yasohachi was about to run after him when somebody grabbed his arm.

It was Tamamo.

'Tamamo-san...'

'It'd be better not to go after him now.'

'But...'

If Yasohachi was correct, that man was probably –

Tamamo shook her head like she knew what Yasohachi was thinking.

'It's fine. Let's let him go this time.'

'Is that OK?'

'Yes. Yasohachi-san, you don't need to get involved. Don't approach him.'

'What on earth...'

– What on earth does that mean?

Yasohachi wanted to ask that, but Tamamo left before he could.

All that remained was a sweet fragrance.

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2

The next day, Yasohachi went to an old shrine.

The torii that used to be painted red had faded and was on a slant. Weeds grew rampant.

Yasohachi made his way through the weeds and went past the glare of mossy stone guard dogs.

Yasohachi smiled wryly and took the almost crumbled steps up to the main building and opened the lattice door.

Inside the dim shrine there was not a deity but a man, sitting.

His hair was untied and he wore a white kimono without hakama, bound with a red cloth belt. His skin was even paler than the kimono.

The man looked as questionable and bewitching as if he had just come out of a painting of ghosts – his name was Ukikumo.

'Oh, it's you, Hachi,' said Ukikumo lazily. He gulped down a cup of rice wine.

'Are you drinking already this early in the morning?' asked Yasohachi.

Ukikumo glared at him.

His eyes were as red as blood –

Yasohachi thought the eyes were beautiful, but Ukikumo said that the world didn't see it that way, so he usually had them covered with a red blindfold that had eyes painted on them in ink.

Yasohachi thought that made Ukikumo stand out more, but Ukikumo didn't seem to mind.

Ukikumo's eyes weren't just red.

They could see the spirits of the dead – that is, ghosts. Ukikumo used that ability to make a living as an exorcist.

Though he was skilled, there was problem with his character.

He drank day and night and had sticky fingers. He had even stolen from Yasohachi's wallet before.

More than anything else, even though he worked as an exorcist, he was slow to actually start work, and he always used excuses to find ways not to accept work. He was a troublesome man.

'Shut up. I just drink when I want to drink,' said Ukikumo with a huge yawn.

'I feel like you're always drinking though.'

'You just happen to always come by when I'm drinking.'

– He had some nerve saying that.

It was impossible to think that it was just a coincidence he always saw him drinking. Yasohachi felt like Ukikumo

even drank while doing his exorcisms.

Yasohachi felt exasperated, but he sat down.

'You didn't bring some troublesome case with you, did you?' said Ukikumo, raising his left eyebrow.

He was sharp as usual, even while drinking.

'Actually...'

'Stop, stop. I'm busy. I don't want to hear it.'

Ukikumo interrupted Yasohachi and lay on the floor, using his arm as a pillow.

'You don't look busy to me...'

'Don't just decide that.'

'But you're just lying on the floor drinking.'

'Idiot,' spat out Ukikumo.

'What's so idiotic about what I said?'

'You're an idiot, so I called you an idiot.'

'That's not an answer.'

Though Yasohachi showed Ukikumo an angry face, Ukikumo didn't seem to care at all.

'You're an idiot for not noticing why you're being called an idiot.'

'Then I'm fine with being an idiot.'

'Oh, being obedient today, are you?'

'So please just listen to what I have to say.'

'I said I'm busy. I'm busy sleeping.'

That was a terrible excuse. How could you be busy sleeping? That said, if Yasohachi objected, Ukikumo would get into a bad humour.

However –

There was no need to try to convince Ukikumo. Even though Ukikumo acted like this, he wasn't actually asleep. Yasohachi knew this from experience.

No matter what Ukikumo said, he still listened. That was Ukikumo for you.

And even though Ukikumo was slow to start work, once he heard of a paranormal matter, he couldn't leave it alone.

Yasohachi sat up properly and started talking about what he'd seen yesterday.

The sudden appearance of a man with a sword. The black miasma that seemed to come out of the sword.

The many spirits that seemed to cling to the man – Yasohachi explained in detail.

Ukikumo didn't move at all as Yasohachi spoke.

That itself was proof that he wasn't asleep.

'That's what happened,' finished Yasohachi.

Ukikumo sighed, still lying on the floor. 'Man, what a boring story,' he said with a click of his tongue.

'It isn't boring,' objected Yasohachi, but he didn't think it was an interesting story either.

'It is. Just take it to the magistrate. The man's been caught by detectives, so there's nothing for me to do.'

Perhaps that was true, but something still bothered Yasohachi.

'But there was something unusual about that sword. And even if it was just for a moment, it seemed like the man was possessed – and by many spirits at that.'

Yasohachi shuddered involuntarily upon thinking of the sight.

'Just a trick of the eye.'

Perhaps it had just been that. It wasn't like he could always see ghosts as Ukikumo did. But still –

'There was definitely something unusual about that man. I'm sure he was possessed.'

Ukikumo snorted. 'That's why I'm saying you're an idiot.'

'Why do you say that?'

'I won't do anything even if it is the work of ghosts.'

'Why not?' asked Yasohachi.

Ukikumo ran a hand through his messy hair and sat up.

His red eyes looked straight at Yasohachi.

When Ukikumo got like this, he was frightening enough to make Yasohachi shiver.

'It's obvious. The answer is money. Money – '

'Money?'

'If I solve this case, will you pay?'

'I...'

Yasohachi was at a loss for words.

Ukikumo had done many exorcisms for free, but normally he asked for a lot of money.

It wasn't the sort of amount Yasohachi could pay for somebody he didn't know.

'And even if that man is possessed, it's too late.'

'Too late?'

'He's been taken by the detectives, right?'

'Oh.'

Finally, Yasohachi understood.

There had been such a riot. The man would probably be given the death sentence. Even if he had been possessed, there was nothing that could be done now.'

'Well, if it bothers you that much, bring some money. Then I might consider helping,' Ukikumo said standoffishly. Just then, the door to the shrine opened.

Together with the pleasant fragrance that reminded one of plum flowers came in the woman who had been at the scene yesterday – Tamamo.

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3

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'Please let me make the request,' said Tamamo, giving Ukikumo a sidelong glance with her almond eyes.

Her perfectly tied hair and gorgeous kimono made her seem almost divinely beautiful.

Yasohachi didn't know what kind of woman Tamamo was. She looked like an expensive prostitute, but if that was the case, it would be unnatural for her to be walking about alone.

She had easily put an end to the man waving about the knife yesterday too. Tamamo was a mystery.

That mystery made Tamamo even more beguiling.

'I had a bad feeling, but it's come to this, eh...'

Ukikumo made a loud click with his tongue.

It seemed like Tamamo and Ukikumo had some sort of connection, but Yasohachi didn't know exactly what it was.

He had wondered before if they had been lovers, but it felt different than that.

He wanted to ask, but he didn't, because he felt like it was something he should stay out of.

'Isn't that a bad attitude to be taking in front of your client?'

Tamamo looked down at Ukikumo with narrowed eyes.

'Request? You're just going to wile your way out of paying,' grumbled Ukikumo.

Tamamo smiled. 'You know me well.'

'Let me just tell you this, but I decided that I'd never take a request from you.'

'Can you really say that?'

'What?'

'You still owe me one...'

Tamamo's words made Ukikumo gulp.

Yasohachi didn't know the details, but it seemed like Tamamo had done Ukikumo a favour so big he couldn't say anything to him.

Ukikumo was always acting so high and mighty. It cheered Yasohachi up to see him so trapped.

'What are you smiling about?'

Ukikumo glared at him.

It seemed like Yasohachi had been smiling unconsciously. He wiped the smile off his face and looked at Tamamo.

'Yasohachi-san, I told you that somebody like you should stay away from a useless man like this, didn't I?'

As Tamamo said that, she brushed a finger along Yasohachi's cheek.

Her cold finger and the sweet smell from her made Yasohachi go dizzy. That was how bewitching a gesture it was.

'Don't tease Hachi too much,' said Ukikumo, looking annoyed as he ran a hand through his hair.

'I'm serious. If Yasohachi-san desires it, I'll happily teach him the ways of an adult woman – '

'Ah, er, no, um...'

Yasohachi's heart thumped. He wasn't sure how to respond.

'Honestly... That's what people call teasing,' said Ukikumo in exasperation. He poured some rice wine from his gourd into his cup and gulped it down.

'Next time then,' Tamamo whispered in Yasohachi's ear. Then, she looked towards Ukikumo again.

'Anyway, I'll leave this case to you,' said Tamamo with narrowed eyes.

Ukikumo just let his head droop and sighed. 'No helping it. It's you. You've already looked into it, right? Tell me what you know.'

After Ukikumo said that, Tamamo smiled slightly. 'Naturally.'

'Don't just say "Naturally" – I don't have the time for this. Tell me already,' said Ukikumo, clearly in a bad mood as he poured more rice wine.

Tamamo nodded and began to speak.

'The incident first occurred at Harunoya, a brothel in Naitou-Shinjuku. A man suddenly came by yelling nonsense and waving a sword about. A clerk, guard and prostitute were killed. Probably over ten people were injured...'

Tamamo spoke in a flat tone, but it was clear how terrible the incident was.

'Then?' urged Ukikumo.

'The man who attacked the shop was a merchant named Jiroemon. A few days ago, he offered to pay to get a prostitute named Yuugiri out of bondage, but he was refused.'

'Oh? Why was he refused?' asked Ukikumo, putting a chin in his hands. Yasohachi wanted to know as well.

A prostitute could become free if somebody paid for her to get out of bondage. There had to be a big reason if she

refused that.

'He just didn't have any money. Harunoya and Yuugiri both knew that. He was a troublesome man too, so Yuugiri only put up with him because of work.'

'So she hated him,' said Ukikumo with a snort.

'After that, he chased her to a nearby row house. The woman Jiroemon was trying to kill as Yuugiri.'

'So he just attacked a woman he didn't like. Nothing for me to do here,' said Ukikumo as he gulped down the rice wine in his cup.

'Wait until I'm finished,' Tamamo said firmly.

'Yeah, yeah,' said Ukikumo with a click of his tongue.

'Jiroemon is a cowardly man. Though he is quick to anger, he isn't the sort of man who'd go about rampaging with a sword, apparently.'

'Tell that to the magistrate,' said Ukikumo indifferently.

'Can you still say that after seeing this?'

Tamamo suddenly took a scroll out of the sleeve of her kimono and unrolled it on the floor.

A picture was painted on the scroll.

'T-this is...'

Yasohachi felt a chill run down his spine as he looked at the painting.

What an unpleasant painting it was –

A man had his back to them and was holding a knife. At his feet were several corpses.

The sword the man in the painting was holding seemed to have black smoke coiling about it.

– No, it wasn't smoke.

Now that Yasohachi looked more carefully, it was the faces of several people who looked to be in pain.

'Kanou Yuuzan then,' said Ukikumo.

Yasohachi could see Kanou Yuuzan's seal in the corner of the painting.

– So this was Kanou Yuuzan's painting!

When Yasohachi realised that, he became even more afraid.

He had been involved with cases concerning Kanou Yuuzan before.

Kanou Yuuzan was a painter who used to paint in the Kanou style, but now, he used his skill to play with people's hearts and take people's lives without dirtying his own hands – he was a shaman.

Yasohachi didn't know the details, but Ukikumo seemed to have some sort of relationship with Kanou Yuuzan.

Yasohachi looked at the painting again.

It was honestly frightening, but at the same time, it was beautiful and compelling.

Perhaps this was what Machida Tenmei meant when he talked about putting soul in a painting.

Kanou Yuuzan probably knew the very deepest parts of people's hearts. That was how he could paint paintings that had such strength in them.

Yasohachi was afraid of the painting, but at the same time, he wondered how he would be able to paint like this.

'What are you spacing out for?'

Yasohachi came back to his senses when Ukikumo spoke.

He couldn't say that he had been fascinated by Kanou Yuuzan's painting, so he said something else instead.

'Where was this painting?'

'Jiroemon's house,' responded Tamamo.

There was no doubt about it then. Yesterday's events must have been Kanou Yuuzan's work.

'Could the person who took the sword then have been...'

'Kanou Yuuzan, probably.'

Ukikumo finished Yasohachi's sentence.

So that was how it was – while Yasohachi understood that now, another question made him cock his head.

'Why did Kanou Yuuzan take the sword?' asked Yasohachi.

Tamamo's almond eyes narrowed slightly. She pointed at the sword in the painting.

'The sword painted here is probably Muramasa...'

After Tamamo said that, Ukikumo sighed and let his shoulders droop dramatically. 'What a drag...'

It sounded like Ukikumo understood everything, but Yasohachi didn't.

'What is Muramasa?' Yasohachi asked, but Ukikumo stood up, ignoring him.

Since Ukikumo was tall, just standing gave him an intimidating air.

'You don't need to know.'

Ukikumo's red eyes glared down at Yasohachi.

'B-but...'

'Did you not hear me? I said you weren't to get involved in this case.'

Under Ukikumo's overwhelming pressure, Yasohachi couldn't object any further.

'Yasohachi-san.'

Somebody called out to Yasohachi on his way home from Ukikumo's shrine.

He stopped and turned around to see lori in her practice clothing with her long hair tied behind her head. She ran up to him.

Though she was the same age as Yasohachi, when lori smiled, showing her white teeth, she looked much younger.

'lori-san, are you heading home from practice?' Yasohachi asked, seeing lori with her wooden sword and very heavy-looking baggage.

'Yes, I was practising at Kondou-sama's Shieikan,' said lori happily.

lori, the daughter of a samurai family who studied the sword, looked instantly older when she held a sword in her hands.

Both lori with a sword and lori smiling this were lori – even if she looked different, there was no change in her beauty.

'Is that so?'

'Are you heading home from an errand, Yasohachi-san?'

'Not exactly... I went to see Ukikumo-san.'

After Yasohachi said that, lori's eyes went wide. 'Did something happen?' She sounded very curious.

lori had experienced a number of paranormal events with Ukikumo too. It seemed just hearing Ukikumo's name made her think of ghosts.

Yasohachi had met lori because of a case involving spirits too. Otherwise, Yasohachi, the son of the owner of a dry goods store, would never have had the chance to exchange words with lori, the daughter of a samurai family.

That said, this case had nothing to do with lori at all.

He wasn't sure whether he should talk about it, but since Ukikumo had just pushed him away, his heart was troubled and he wanted somebody to listen to him.

'Actually – '

Yasohachi cleared his throat and told lori what he had seen when he visited Tenmei yesterday.

'I heard about that incident as well,' said lori once Yasohachi had finished.

'Is that so?'

For a moment, Yasohachi was surprised, but now that he thought about it, it had been such a huge fuss. It made sense that rumours had spread this quickly.

'Why would Ukikumo-san get involved?' lori cocked her head.

From what Yasohachi had explained, it wouldn't sound like exorcism was necessary.

'The sword the man was holding seemed to be possessed by something suspicious.'

'What could it have been?'

'I can't explain it well, but it felt like something hateful was coiling around the blade.'

'So Yasohachi-san, you think that mean is being manipulated by hate, just as my brother had been...' Iori's expression clouded over.

Shintarou, Iori's older brother, had recently been possessed by a ghost and been made to wander around at night while wielding a sword.

Thanks to Ukikumo, Shintarou was safe, but who knows what would have happened otherwise.

'Yes, I do.'

'What does Ukikumo-san think?' asked Iori.

'It seems he thinks Kanou Yuuzan is involved this time - '

The moment Yasohachi said that name, Iori's face froze.

Iori also knew how frightening Kanou Yuuzan was.

'I have a bad feeling.'

'So do I.'

'Do you know anything else?'

'Ukikumo-san was concerned about the name of the sword involved.'

'The name of the sword?'

'Yes, I think they said Muramasa - '

When Yasohachi said that, Iori's expression grew even grimmer.

'Are you sure they said Muramasa?' asked Iori to confirm.

Her voice was trembling, which was unusual.

'Do you know it?'

'I've heard the rumours...'

'What kind of sword is it?'

'To put it simply, it's a demon sword.'

'A demon sword - '

'Yes. It steals the soul of the one who wields it and curses them - it's a magic sword. It is detested as a sword that goes against the shogun.'

'A sword that goes against the shogun - that isn't pleasant.'

'Muramasa was used by people who wanted to revolt against the shogunate, apparently...'

'What!?'

'The shogun family grew to resent Muramasa, and the vassals who used Muramasa blades would get the signature removed.'

Iori probably didn't intend it herself, but her words were unsettling and made Yasohachi's heart grow cold.

'Is there really a blade like that?' asked Yasohachi hesitantly. His voice shook.

I think it's just a legend. Muramasa is the name of a swords craftsman from Ise, not the name of the sword.'

'Is that so...'

Yasohachi was a townsperson who had never held a sword, so he didn't know much about things like this, but Iori knew, of course, being the daughter of a samurai family.

'That's why I think it's just a rumour.'

'Then there's no demon sword?'

'Sometimes one feels that there is something in a sword when you hold one, but I don't think there's enough power within one to make a man go mad.'

'Is that so?'

Iori was quite skilful with the sword. Yasohachi had seen Iori easily defeat men from samurai families.

If Iori was saying that, it was probably true.

'Are you going to investigate this case then, Yasohachi-san?' asked Iori, shapely eyebrows furrowing slightly.

That was the question –

'I was intending on it... but Ukikumo-san told me not to get involved,' said Yasohachi. His shoulders slumped.

Ukikumo was probably keeping Yasohachi away because Kanou Yuuzan was involved. Kanou Yuuzan was a frightening shaman – Yasohachi didn't really want to get involved either.

However, it was also true that he wanted to know what Kanou Yuuzan's goal was in making the incident happen.

Perhaps Machida Tenmei's mocking words about how Yasohachi didn't know anything were bothering him, making Yasohachi stubborn.

'I agree with Ukikumo-san,' Iori said.

'Eh?'

'I also think that Yasohachi-san shouldn't get involved this time.'

Yasohachi hadn't thought that Iori would say the same thing.

'Why?'

'Why? Yasohachi-san, you just happened to be a witness. This incident doesn't have anything to do with you, does it?'

'That's true, but...'

'There's no reason for you to put yourself in danger. You can leave this to Ukikumo,' said Iori with a smile.

It felt like he was being treated like a child. It wasn't just Iori. It was the same with Ukikumo.

That was probably what Yasohachi was most dissatisfied with.

Ukikumo and Iori had saved Yasohachi so many times. He didn't want to be protected all the time – sometimes, he wanted to help them too.

That said, it was also true that he didn't have enough strength to proudly say that.

'I can never do anything...'

The words came out of Yasohachi's mouth unconsciously.

Iori looked surprised, and then she smiled gently. 'That isn't true. Yasohachi-san, you always save me.'

'I never do...'

He had never saved anyone.

'And you have your paintings, don't you, Yasohachi-san?' Iori said brightly, but Yasohachi couldn't be happy at all. Machida Tenmei had just criticised his paintings completely the day before.

However, it would just be complaining if he told Iori that.

'That's true. I'll go home and paint,' Yasohachi said with a bitter smile, and then he turned away from Iori and began to walk –

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Holed up in his room, Yasohachi looked at his own paintings, lined up on his desk.

There was no strength in them, just as Machida Tenmei had said.

Like clouds in the sky, there was nothing solid about them – you couldn't grasp them.

He felt very depressed today somehow.

Tenmei's words were a part of it, but Ukikumo's telling him to keep out was also another part. Iori's kind words also echoed within him.

They all seemed to come from the same roots.

– You haven't seen what's hidden at all.

Just as Tenmei said, perhaps he had lived his life only looking at the surface, peacefully wading in warm waters.

That was why he couldn't paint strong paintings and nobody would rely on him.

The more he thought about it, the more useless he felt. Yasohachi just lay there on the ground.

The red light of the setting sun lit up the sliding door.

– How do you get that colour?

Yasohachi thought about that vaguely – and then the sliding door opened, and his older sister Osayo looked in.

'What are you just lying about for?' said Osayo in exasperation, a hand on her waist.

Though they were only three years apart, Osayo had looked after Yasohachi since he was a kid like she was his mother, and she always had a lot to nag about.

'I was thinking about a lot of things.'

'Doesn't look like that to me.'

It made sense that Osayo would say that with Yasohachi looking the way he did. He sat up.

'Do you need something?' he asked.

'Right,' said Osayo, clapping her hands together. 'Somebody's here to see you.'

'Who?'

'He won't say his name. He looks like a monk though...'

'A monk?'

Though Yasohachi did know some monks, he didn't know any so well they would come visit, and it was strange that Osayo didn't know his name.

While Yasohachi was thinking, somebody appeared behind Osayo –

'Aah!'

Osayo let out a scream and jumped away.

Yasohachi got up too, in his shock.

Standing there was a monk in worn robes wearing a bamboo hat that covered his whole face.

'I apologise for coming in without permission,' the monk said politely, bowing his head.

Though Yasohachi couldn't see his face, he recognised that cool voice and strange appearance.

Osayo looked at Yasohachi. She had probably been unsure whether to let this man in because of his suspicious appearance.

'Please sit down,' said Yasohachi to the monk. He gave Osayo a nod.

Normally, he wouldn't want to let this monk in, but he didn't want to think about what the monk would do if he caused trouble now.

He was afraid that Osayo would be in danger –

Though Osayo looked concerned, she bowed and moved to leave the room, only for the monk to call out to stop her.

'It may be a rather serious conversation, so you don't need to worry about tea,' the monk said. Osayo looked even

more troubled.

'Sister, please don't worry about it. I want to talk alone,' Yasohachi said in as firm a voice as he could. He didn't want to worry Osayo, and above all else, he didn't want to get her involved.

Osayo looked like she wanted to say something, but in the end, she left silently.

After Yasohachi was sure that Osayo was gone, he quietly said, 'What on earth are you here for, Kanou Yuuzan-sama?'

It was faint, but he could smell incense.

Sweet, enticing – a smell that bewitched.

'So you noticed?'

After saying that, the monk took off his bamboo hat.

The face underneath it was completely different from the dirty robes – a face beautiful enough that you might mistake it for a woman's.

Yasohachi had only seen the face once before, but he could say for certain. The person in front of him right now was the shaman Kanou Yuuzan.

There was a faint smile on his face, but it was cold enough to freeze.

'I asked why you were here,' said Yasohachi, trying to stop his throat from trembling.

'Oh, it's nothing important. I just happened to see you yesterday, Yasohachi-san, so I thought I'd pay you a visit.'

Kanou Yuuzan's red lips were turned up in a smile.

The smile was frightening, but at the same time, it was terribly charming.

'You were the one who took the sword then.'

'You have keen observation.'

'An ominous air like that stands out.'

'Is that so? I am one who moves from shadow to shadow – if you say I stand out, I will need to be more careful from now on.'

Yuuzan put his chin in his hand and nodded.

It was strange. Yuuzan was frightening, but when he talked like this, it felt like he didn't mean any harm.

It was even possible to think that he really had only come here to pay a visit.

'Why did you do something like that?' asked Yasohachi.

Yuuzan raised an eyebrow. 'What do you mean by something like that?'

He was playing dumb on purpose.

'I'm referring to how Jiroemon went wild with a sword.'

'Oh, that', said Yuuzan. His eyes went to the sliding door.

The light on the sliding door was going from red to black.

Soon it would be dark out.

'I wouldn't know how to answer if you asked why.'

'Eh?'

'I only do what I do at request.'

'Somebody asked you to make Jiroemon rampage with a sword?'

'No, that was only one method. I was asked to bury somebody who would cause trouble if left in this world.'

'So the goal was to bury somebody else, and you used Jiroemon for that goal?'

As Yasohachi said that, he felt anew how frightening Yuuzan was.

Yuuzan never directly killed anybody. He skilfully used others to make them kill.

That hid both his existence and the reason for the person's death.

'You really are rather clever.'

Yuuzan smiled, showing his teeth. Being praised by this man didn't make Yasohachi happy at all.

'Don't you think it's cruel? Using people completely unrelated to make them kill...'

It was aberrant.

'That is a misunderstanding.'

'A misunderstanding?'

'All I did – '

Yuuzan put his face closer to Yasohachi's.

Up close, Yuuzan's face seemed otherworldly. That was how beautiful it was.

' – was grant Jiroemon's wish.'

Yuuzan's excuse was terribly selfish.

'Nobody would want to kill someone!' Yasohachi said firmly.

Yuuzan smiled in a slightly unpleasant way. 'You don't understand anything.'

'...'

'In this world, there are many people who want to kill someone. That is why shamans like me are necessary.'

'But Jiroemon...'

'What do you know about him?'

'Urgh...'

– He didn't know anything.

Yasohachi had no way of knowing what Jiroemon was thinking.

'I just gave his back a little push.'

'Gave his back a push?'

'Yes. I took the wish deep within Jiroemon's heart and gave him the chance to grant it. That's all.'

'That's just sophistry.'

Yuuzan made it sound beautiful, but it was just an excuse.

'That is a difference in opinion,' Yuuzan said calmly.

When Yasohachi talked with this man, he felt like he would take everything he said for granted.

Even though Yasohachi thought he was speaking the truth, somehow, he felt like he might start doubting himself.

He couldn't lose here though.

'So your goal was to kill the guard and prostitute at Harunoya,' said Yasohachi, clearing his head.

Tamamo had said that a guard and a prostitute had been killed by Jiroemon.

'Not quite.'

'Not quite?'

'Yes. That was only one part of my goal. The person that must be buried is somebody else.'

'The prostitute named Yuugiri?'

That was the woman who was almost killed in front of the row house.

'I cannot say any more.' Yuuzan shook his head.

'Why not?'

'Why do you want to know?'

That was obvious. 'Because I want to save them.<sup>7</sup>

No matter whom Yuuzan was trying to kill, if Yasohachi could save them, he wanted to.

'Can you do that?'

'I won't know unless I try.'

Yasohachi's reply made Yuuzan laugh aloud.

It wasn't mockery. It seemed like Yuuzan really was amused.

'You're interesting. You really are.'

'I wasn't trying to make you laugh...'

'I know. You're serious, aren't you? That's why you're interesting – '

Yuuzan, smiling, looked at Yasohachi coldly.

The pressure from him put Yasohachi at a loss for words.

'Fine. I will make an exception and tell you,' Yuuzan murmured.

'What?'

'The person I am trying to kill.'

'Who is it?' Yasohachi's voice shook.

He felt like something terrible would happen to him once he found out.

'The baby.'

'What?'

'I need to kill the baby.'

'What are you saying?' asked Yasohachi, but Yuuzan didn't answer.

He slowly went to the desk in the back of the room, as if the conversation was completely finished.

It was too late for Yasohachi to do anything.

Yuuzan took Yasohachi's paintings and looked at them.

Yuuzan was a shaman, but he had been in the very large Kanou school of painting before. He used paintings as a tool for his curses, but they were very skilfully done.

It made Yasohachi not so much afraid as ashamed to have Yuuzan look at his paintings.

'Please give those back.'

Unexpectedly, Yuuzan put the paintings back readily.

Then, he turned to look right at Yasohachi.

'Did you paint these?'

'...'

Yasohachi couldn't respond. Yuuzan seemed to take that as a yes, and then he nodded. 'Do you want to hear my opinion?' he asked with a bewitching smile.

– I do.

That was what Yasohachi really thought.

Even though Yuuzan was a shaman, he was an excellent painter. It was natural for Yasohachi to want to know his opinion of his paintings.

However, he couldn't say those words aloud.

If he asked, something within him would change. That was how he felt.

Yuuzan seemed to know Yasohachi would not respond. He sat in front of Yasohachi quietly.

His cold gaze shot through Yasohachi.

Yasohachi wanted to back away, but he was frozen there.

'You have excellent skill. The composition is good, and your delicate and beautiful use of colour is fascinating. This is natural talent. However – '

There, Yuuzan stopped.

Yasohachi gulped and waited for Yuuzan to continue, but Yuuzan said nothing.

– Is he teasing me?

'However?'

The word slipped out of Yasohachi's mouth. He was unable to stop his desire to know what came next.

Yuuzan smiled, seeming satisfied. 'There is no soul in your painting.'

Yuuzan's words seemed to echo through the room.

Yasohachi's ears rang. He felt his whole body reeling. It felt heavy.

'Just... as Tenmei-san said...'

He said the words without thinking.

'By Tenmei, do you mean Machida Tenmei?' Yuuzan asked.

Yasohachi didn't answer, but Yuuzan seemed to read the answer from Yasohachi's expression.

'You don't have to listen to what a hack like him says.' Yuuzan gave him a small nod.

'Eh?'

Yuuzan put his face close to Yasohachi's ear and whispered, 'There is no soul in his paintings either. There is wildness, but that is just a warped view because of his lack of skill. Perhaps it was just jealousy towards you, somebody who has skill.'

The peculiar voice shook Yasohachi's heart.

'What do you mean?'

'That man is jealous of you, because you are more skilled than him, and he is trying to crush you.'

'That is...'

'Impossible – can you say that?'

'But you also said that there is no soul in my paintings. That would mean it wasn't jealousy but fact.'

The smile left Yuuzan's face.

'You don't understand anything.'

'What do you mean?'

'Machida Tenmei has no skill or delicacy. In short, he has no talent. Those without talent have a limit, no matter how much they try. That man has realised his own limit, so he is running away from it.'

'What are you saying?'

'You don't understand?'

'I don't.'

'You have something he doesn't.'

'Something he doesn't?'

'Natural talent. You can paint more wonderful paintings than anyone, but in order to do that, there is something you need that you desperately lack – '

'Something I need?' repeated Yasohachi, brows furrowed.

It was strange. Even though Yasohachi knew he couldn't get wrapped up in Yuuzan's words, he was already entranced.

'Shadow – '

Just as Yuuzan spoke, a bell tinkled.

'Yes. The reason there is no soul in your paintings is that there is no darkness in them.'

'No darkness...'

'Yes. Places with light must have darkness. Removing one makes you lose sight of the true nature of things. It's the same for paintings. A painting comes to life only with both light and darkness – '

Once again, there was the tinkle of a bell.

Just as Yuuzan said, a painting came to life only with both light and darkness. No matter how beautiful a colour, there had to be something to bring out that colour.

Yasohachi understood that. But –

'What are you trying to say?'

'You are a person of spring sunlight. Filled with gentle and warm light. However, that is all you are – there is no darkness.'

And that is why my paintings don't come alive?'

'Yes.' Yuuzan nodded.

Yuuzan had seemed so unpleasant and disturbing up until now, but at some point, he had come to feel like a natural fixture of the room.

Did that mean that Yasohachi had begun to accept Yuuzan, or that the room had fallen into darkness?

'What should I do?'

Yasohachi sent Yuuzan a pleading gaze.

If there was a way to put soul in his paintings, he wanted to know it. Even if he had to talk to Kanou Yuuzan to do it – he had begun to think that way.

Yuuzan smiled and then put something cylindrical covered in cloth on the tatami.

'What is this?'

'It should help you paint paintings that come to life.'

After saying that, Yuuzan pulled the cloth away.

In front of Yasohachi was a sword in a crimson sheath –

It was the sword Jiroemon had used in front of Machida Tenmei's row house. It had taken in the bloody of money and led those who used it to destruction –

The demon sword Muramasa.

'A sword?'

'Yes. I will give this sword to you.'

'This...'

'It isn't just a sword. This sword will definitely grant what you desire – '

Yuuzan held the sword up for Yasohachi to see.

The sword let out an ominous air. It filled the room instantly and made Yasohachi's body feel heavy.

– This is a demon sword.

Yasohachi couldn't take it. But at the same time, he wanted it, if it would give him what he lacked.

– No! I can't!

Yasohachi knew what had happened to the man who had last held this sword. If he took the sword himself, he would go somewhere he could never return from.

He would be swallowed whole by the darkness and lose himself. Even if he learned to paint paintings that came alive, they wouldn't be his paintings.

But wasn't that fine? What was the point of continuing to paint paintings without darkness?

Ting –

The sound of the bell shook Yasohachi's heart.

As if that was a sign, his hand reached out towards the sword. A power that he couldn't fight seemed to be pulling him towards it.

Yuuzan smiled, seeming pleased.

If this continued, Yasohachi would take the sword.

If that happened, he would lose himself.

He tried to fight it, but his body wouldn't listen to him.

'I...'

'You can't!'

Somebody suddenly called out. The sliding door slid open and somebody rushed in.

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'You can't take that sword!

The door slid open. The person who rushed in was somebody Yasohachi knew –

'Iori-san!'

When Yasohachi called out Iori's name, she smiled slightly and nodded.

'I-Iori-san, why are you here?'

'After we parted earlier, I couldn't help being worried about you so I came to check on you.'

'Check on me?'

'Yes, since you looked dissatisfied earlier...'

It was just as Iori said.

Yasohachi had been discontent when he parted ways with Iori earlier. Iori had noticed then.

Iori had met Kanou Yuuzan again during the incident with the Aoyama family before. She had probably been concerned because she knew how horrifying he was.

'Iori-san...'

'When I came here, Osayo-san said she was worried about the suspicious man who had come. I came up because I had an idea about who he could be,' Iori said quickly.

Yuuzan sighed. 'We were at such a good point, and now we've been interrupted,' he murmured, and then he slowly stood up.

In complete contrast to earlier, he seemed to let out a thirst for blood.

'You are Kanou Yuuzan, are you not?' asked Iori.

'Yes,' Yuuzan replied easily.

'Please do not mislead Yasohachi-san any further.'

'Mislead? Me? Please stop joking. I was only trying to fulfil Yasohachi-san's heart's desires.'

'That is false. You were only trying to use Yasohachi-san for your own purposes.'

Iori held her wooden sword.

Still, Yuuzan did not falter – no, he smiled at ease.

'Do you plan to attack me?' Yuuzan asked quietly.

'Depending on your next move, I may,' Iori said firmly.

Yasohachi tried to stand as well, but his head was dizzy and he fell back down immediately.

'It seems you know a little of the sword. However, you will only injure yourself with such half-hearted skill.'

Yuuzan looked at Iori with a sharp, cold gaze.

'Your sword is still sheathed. However, I am already ready. You yourself should know which of us is in a better position.'

It was just as Iori said.

Yasohachi did not know how skilled Yuuzan was, but from this situation, Iori was much more prepared. However, Yasohachi still had a bad feeling.

Yuuzan laughed aloud. 'I don't need to draw a sword when facing a little girl – '

As Yuuzan said that, he swiftly hit Iori in the chest

In the next moment, Iori flew through the air and fell to the tatami. That wasn't all. Yuuzan had taken her wooden sword.

This was what people meant when they said quick as lightning.

It was so fast that Yasohachi hadn't been able to see what had happened. It seemed Iori was in the same position. She was on the ground, stunned.

'Now, in a situation like this, even an unwise young lady should know which of us is in a better position,' said Yuuzan with a smile.

Iori's expression was twisted in humiliation.

Yuuzan threw aside the wooden sword he had taken from Iori and put a hand on the handle of his own sword.

'Stop!'

Yasohachi tried to step between them, but Yuuzan stopped him.

'If you move, this girl will die.'

'Urgh...'

Yasohachi knew how skilled Yuuzan was from his movements earlier. There was no way Yasohachi could fight him.

Still, he couldn't stop trying.

'Uooooo!'

Yasohachi ran at Yuuzan, screaming.

However –

Yasohachi's arms hit air and he fell with no resistance.

It seemed that Yuuzan had easily evaded him.

Yasohachi tried to get up, but Yuuzan stepped on his back and stopped his movements. Even though Yuuzan looked slim, he was incredibly strong.

'Yasohachi-san, I meant what I said earlier,' Yuuzan said slowly. 'You have natural talent. However, your heart is like a white piece of paper – it does not know filth. That is where there is no strength there.'

'What are you trying to say?' asked Yasohachi, even though it was hard to breathe.

He would stall for time to let lori get away.

However, Yuuzan must have known Yasohachi's plan from the start. Yuuzan unsheathed his sword and turned the tip towards lori.

Yuuzan's sword seemed to have something black dancing about it.

'Let me give you what you lack.'

After saying that, Yuuzan wielded his blade.

The sound of the blade cutting through the air sounded like a scream to Yasohachi.

'W-what are you going to do?'

'You still don't know? I will dye your pure white heart with this girl's blood.'

'Wha!?

'Your heart dyed red will finally have darkness within it. That darkness will give your paintings strength.'

Yasohachi frantically struggled now that he knew Yuuzan's plan, but his body didn't move at all.

Yuuzan smiled maliciously to mock him.

'Iori-san! Please run!' screamed Yasohachi.

But lori still did not try to run.

Her eyes went to the wooden sword that Yuuzan had tossed aside. She probably meant to take it and use it to return Yuuzan's attack.

However, that was a mad idea.

Yasohachi was sure lori would not be able to win against Yuuzan. She would probably be killed before she even picked up the wooden sword.

'Stop!'

As Yasohachi shouted, Iori tried to grab the wooden sword.

Yuuzan's blade shot out for Iori.

– She was killed!

Just as Yasohachi thought that, somebody rushed in.

That person quickly unsheathed a sword and blocked Yuuzan's strike.

Clang – the sound of steel and against steel.

'Hijikata-san!' shouted Yasohachi without thinking.

The man who had run in and saved Iori was Hijikata Toshizou, a medicine merchant.

'It seems I made it in time' said Hijikata, eyes narrowing as he smiled.

'Why are you here?'

'That man asked me to come,' Hijikata said curtly. Then, he readied his sword and turned towards Yuuzan.

'Hijikata-san the medicine merchant,' Yuuzan said bitterly.

Hijikata smiled. 'It's been a while. I'm glad you look well.'

From Hijikata's words, it seemed they were old acquaintances. Hijikata really was a mystery.

He had a masculine face with a gentle demeanour, but sometimes he looked incredibly cold. He was also incredibly skilled with the sword despite being a medicine merchant.

'It seems you're well too.'

Yuuzan smiled back.

'Thanks to you.'

When Hijikata responded, he did not have his usual gentle smile. He looked so frightening that he could have been mistaken for a demon.

'Why are you with that man? If I had to say which, I thought you would stand on my side.'

Yuuzan pulled back his sword and stepped away from Hijikata as he spoke.

'Perhaps.'

'Why not come with me then? You might be rather useful.'

'Unfortunately, there is a man I have vowed to obey.'

'That man, you mean?'

'No, somebody else. Currently, he is only an instructor teaching the way of the sword at a dojo, but he will leave his man in history.'

Yasohachi didn't know what man Hijikata was talking about, but he had to be somebody incredible.

'A breakdown of negotiations then.'

'It appears to be that way.'

'What will you do? Do you plan to square off with me?' Yuuzan asked.

'That is not my plan – for now,' said Hijikata, words heavy with meaning.

'Then what do you plan to do?'

'It is up to you.'

After Hijikata said that, there was the sound of many footsteps rushing closer.

'You called others...'

'Yes, the people of this family have gathered.'

In response, Yasohachi's father Genta, his sister Osayo, the clerks and apprentices came in.

Everyone was shocked to see the two men with their swords.

'Yasohachi!'

'What's happening?'

Genta and Osayo called out.

'I also called for detectives, but what will you do?' Hijikata said quietly.

Yuuzan looked at the people who had gathered and then smiled. 'Fine. Let us leave the entertainment for next time.'

After saying that, Yuuzan sheathed his sword, wore his bamboo hat and left the room breezily.

Perhaps this was a chance to arrest him. Just as Yasohachi thought that, Hijikata shook his head, as if he could read Yasohachi's mind.

'If something happens here, there will be many victims.'

It was just as Hijikata said.

Perhaps with all of their strength they would be able to subdue Yuuzan, but Genta and Osayo – his family – and Iori too probably wouldn't be able to escape unharmed.

Ting –

With the sound of the bell, Yuuzan disappeared completely, as if he had never been there at all.

Under Hijikata's instructions, Yasohachi and lori went to the second floor of Marukuma, which they were well accustomed to.

Ukikumo sat inside, leaning against the wall as usual.

'Looks like you're all right.'

Ukikumo looked at Yasohachi and lori with his two red eyes and then gulped down the rice wine in his cup.

'What do you mean?' asked Yasohachi, going up to Ukikumo.

It had started with the incident at Tenmei's row house. Just when Yasohachi had thought that Ukikumo was keeping him in the dark, Kanou Yuuzan had come to visit –

Hijikata had saved lori just in time and been kept out of harm, but Yasohachi was bewildered by all these things he didn't understand.

'Thank your sister,' said Ukikumo with a wry smile.

'Eh?'

'After Kanou Yuuzan came by, your sister came here since she thought things were odd.'

'My sister...'

Yasohachi hadn't talked to Osayo about Kanou Yuuzan, but the ominous air about him had probably made her feel uneasy.

'So I got Toshizou to go check.'

Ukikumo glanced at Hijikata.

Hijikata nodded breezily and sat down gracefully.

He really was a mysterious man.

Though he was smiling gently now, when he was facing Yuuzan, he had looked like a demon.

No, it would be more appropriate to say an Asura –

He seemed to know Yuuzan too, and not just casually.

'Why did Kanou Yuuzan go to Yasohachi-san's place?' asked lori.

That was right. Yasohachi knew why Hijikata had come, but that wasn't the only question he had.

'Why did he?' asked Yasohachi, leaning towards Ukikumo.

After a long pause, Ukikumo said with a blank expression, 'Probably just playing around on his part.'

'Playing around?'

'He probably saw how pure you were and wanted to dirty that.'

Yuuzan had said something like that, but –

'Why?'

'He was trying to drag you into the darkness, Hachi.'

Ukikumo's red eyes narrowed.

'Into the darkness?'

'Yeah. To put it another way, he was trying to drag you to his side.'

Yasohachi could feel what Ukikumo was getting at.

Putting aside whether he was pure or not, there was an invisible line between him and Yuuzan.

It was a line that people shouldn't cross. To borrow Yuuzan's words, it was the world of darkness.

But Yasohachi still didn't understand.

'Why would he do that?'

'Like I said, he was just playing around. He's done the same thing before.'

'Eh?'

'Dirtying somebody's heart and pulling them into the darkness as a joke.'

'What happened then?'

'Don't ask!' spat out Ukikumo.

His red eyes seemed to burn with a fiery anger. Yasohachi didn't know the details, but he could tell it had had a terrible conclusion.

– What would have happened to me if I took the sword then?

Yasohachi felt a chill run down his spine.

He felt like a darkness that the word 'tragedy' wasn't enough to describe would have been waiting for him.

'Why not sit down?' Ukikumo said, sighing.

Yasohachi and Iori glanced at each other, nodded and sat.

He had a mountain of questions to ask. He opened his mouth, but Ukikumo interrupted him.

'Let me hear your side of things first,' said Ukikumo, pouring rice wine from his gourd into his cup.

'Mine?'

'Yeah. Did Yuuzan say anything about this case?'

Yasohachi thought about it.

His head had been fuzzy from the strange smell, but he remembered what they had talked about.

'He said that attacking the brothel had only been part of his goal.'

Ukikumo's left eyebrow went up. 'A part of his goal?'

'Yes. There is somebody else he needs to bury.'

'Who?' asked Ukikumo after gulping down his rice wine.

'I don't know the details, but...'

'What?'

'The baby. That's what he said.'

'Feels like there could be another meaning to that,' Ukikumo said, rubbing his chin.

Yasohachi agreed. There was no reason a shaman would have to bury a newborn child.

It would make sense to think there was another meaning to the word, but Yasohachi didn't know what it was.

Yasohachi was still thinking when the door slid open and a woman came in.

It was Tamamo –

Everyone's eyes went to her.

Yasohachi would have felt embarrassed by that and looked down, but Tamamo just waited for a while, almost as if gloating, before opening her glossy red lips.

'That's exactly what it means.'

Everyone went, 'Eh?'

Tamamo smiled like she was enjoying this and slowly walked up to Ukikumo. She sat down, leaning against him coquettishly.

Every one of her actions was bewitching.

Tamamo looked at Yasohachi and the others while whispering something in Ukikumo's ear.

Ukikumo seemed to understand everything after hearing that, as he smiled, showing his white teeth.

'What is it?' asked Yasohachi. He leaned closer to Ukikumo.

Ukikumo took the staff resting against the wall and stood up. He looked at everyone in the room and said, 'I'm going to exorcise the spirit.'

After saying that, Ukikumo pounded the staff against the tatami –

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Yasohachi and the others went to the alley where Tenmei's row house was –

The scene of the crime.

Night had fallen and the row house was no longer lit – everyone was probably asleep.

However, there was the sound of a baby crying, however faint.

Yasohachi happened to glance to his side and saw lori gripping her wooden sword tightly. Perhaps it was nerves – her expression was stiff and grim. Yasohachi felt the same way.

In complete contrast to that, Hijikata, Tamamo and Ukikumo looked as calm as they always did.

They were probably used to things like this, but more than that, they just had nerves of steel.

'What do you plan to do?' asked Yasohachi.

Ukikumo looked at him with his red eyes. In the moon light, Ukikumo's pale skin seemed even paler, and his eyes seemed redder too.

'I said earlier. I'm going to exorcise the spirit,' said Ukikumo as if it was a matter of fact, but Yasohachi didn't understand.

'What I mean is...'

Yasohachi began to speak, but then a woman's scream cut through the night.

Yasohachi looked for the source and saw a terrified woman carrying a baby run out of the row house.

It was the woman from the room beside Tenmei's that Yasohachi had seen on the day of the incident.

'He's already made his move then...' spat out Ukikumo. He ran up to the fleeing woman.

Yasohachi and lori shared a glance before following. To be honest, Yasohachi was afraid, but he couldn't bear having everything end without understand anything at all.

'Stay away!' shouted Ukikumo, who had reached the woman.

Yasohachi and lori halted in their tracks.

Ukikumo slowly stepped back, taking care to protect the woman.

Then, something ran out of the row house that the woman had fled from.

It was a person –

He was holding a sword and growling like a threatening dog.

'That's...'

Yasohachi spoke up without thinking when he saw the man under the moonlight.

The man holding the sword was a man Yasohachi knew – Machida Tenmei.

His eyes were bloodshot and saliva dripped from his mouth. Though he looked like a beast, he was definitely Tenmei.

'Why Tenmei-san?'

Before Yasohachi got an answer, Tenmei raised his sword and attacked Ukikumo.

Ukikumo quickly dodged and blocked the sword.

There was a pause as Ukikumo faced Tenmei.

It was strange.

Tenmei's stance was rough and it looked like he was just waving his sword at random. With Ukikumo's skill, he should have been able to defeat him easily.

'People like that are the most troublesome,' said Iori, as if she had heard Yasohachi's question.

'Why?'

'They've lost their senses and don't care about their own life. You can't read their attacks.'

'Is that how it is?'

'Yes,' Iori said with a nod.

Yasohachi felt like he understood.

Tenmei swung his sword back and forth.

His body was unsteady – it shook every time he swung the sword. Rather than Tenmei swinging the sword, it was like the sword was swinging him.

Perhaps because Ukikumo was protecting the woman and baby, it looked like he was the one at a disadvantage.

– Should I help?

Yasohachi tried to step forward, but Hijikata stopped him.

'If you go unprepared, you will only be killed.'

Just as Hijikata said, if Yasohachi wasn't careful, he would probably be cut by the sword.

'But...'

'It's fine. He isn't the sword of man who would falter at something like that.'

As if to prove Hijikata's words. Ukikumo used his staff like a spear and jabbed Tenmei in the stomach.

Tenmei was thrust backwards and hit the wall of the row house. He slid against the wall to the ground.

Ukikumo put his staff on his shoulder and sighed.

'What is this?' asked Yasohachi, running up to Yasohachi.

Why was Tenmei waving a sword around and trying to attack the woman and baby living next to him – Yasohachi didn't understand.

'Exactly what you see.'

Ukikumo snorted.

Yasohachi couldn't accept that. HE was asking because he didn't understand what he saw.

'I don't understand!' said Yasohachi roughly.

Ukikumo sighed.

'That man was being manipulated by Kanou Yuuzan too.'

'Eh?'

'Look. That's the demon sword Muramasa.'

Ukikumo pointed at the sword Tenmei was holding with his staff.

A sword with a scarlet handle – it was Muramasa.

'So he was being manipulated by the demon sword?'

'Not quite.' Ukikumo shook his head. 'Muramasa isn't a sword that manipulates people.'

'Then what is it?'

'It's the hatred of the many people that dwells within it.'

Ukikumo's eyes looked at Muramasa.

'Hatred?'

'Yes. The sword kills people. The spirits of those who were killed become hate and dwell within the sword. The hatred and pain of all those spirits create that –'

Ukikumo's explanation made Yasohachi remember what he saw yesterday at the row house.

The shadows coiling around Jiroemon's body had probably been the hatred of the many spirits who had been killed by the sword.

'Those who take the sword in their hands become possessed by the many spirits in the sword who can't find peace. They lose themselves. That is the true nature of the demon sword,' said Ukikumo, hitting his staff against the ground.

In the sword's long history, there had been many owners – it had probably killed many people. Each time, the hatred within the sword grew, and it had become a demon sword that let out an ominous miasma.

'Under that definition, all swords that have killed people are demon swords, but that sword has killed too many people.'

Ukikumo's words made Iori bite her lip and look down.

Perhaps she felt that as somebody who studied the sword, no matter how beautifully she described it, swordsmanship was still used to kill people.

However, Iori wielded a wooden sword. It didn't take people's lives.

Yasohachi thought about saying that, but he felt it would only be useless consolation and couldn't say it in the end.

'So Tenmei-san was manipulated by the demon sword,' said Yasohachi after a pause.

'I said this earlier too, but demon swords don't manipulate people. It only makes them lose their senses. That makes it so the anger and hatred in their heart grows so much they can't hold it back,' Ukikumo said quietly.

Those who held the demon sword were surrounded by countless spirits, and their hatred and anger enveloped them.

It was definitely enough to make anyone lose their senses.

'But why did Tenmei-san try to kill that woman?'

Yasohachi looked at the woman who was shaking while holding a baby.

Even though Tenmei had lost his senses, there was no reason for him to kill her.

'The noise, probably,' said Ukikumo with a snort.

Yasohachi understood now.

The baby's cries from the other room – Tenmei had been irritated by them.

If he had been in his usual state of mind, it would have ended there, but after taking the demon sword in his hand, the anger within Tenmei had grown to the point he had wanted to kill the baby.

'Why did Tenmei-san have the demon sword?' asked Yasohachi.

Ukikumo's face twisted. 'Kanou Yuuzan probably gave it to him.'

That was the only thing that made sense, but Yasohachi was troubled by that.

'Tenmei-san knew Kanou Yuuzan, and he had told me to keep away from him before.'

It was when the incident at the Aoyama household had occurred.

It was hard to think that Tenmei would so easily take a demon sword from Kanou Yuuzan.

'Kanou Yuuzan slips into the cracks of people's hearts, no matter what they think. That's the sort of man he is. You experienced that yourself, didn't you, Hachi?'

It was true. Even though Yasohachi had known he was talking to Kanou Yuuzan, his skilful tongue had been bewitching – he had almost taken the sword into his hand himself.

'Excuse me...' interrupted Iori, sounding troubled. 'From what I hear, it sounds like Kanou Yuuzan gave Tenmei-san the sword in order to kill that woman...'

'Oh, you're rather clever for a young woman,' said Tamamo.

'What do you mean by that?'

Iori's cheeks were red in indignation. Tamamo patted them. 'Your angry face is cute too.'

'P-please stop that.'

Iori shook her head. Tamamo seemed amused as she looked at her. Then, she went up to the woman holding the baby.

'This woman used to be a prostitute at Harunoya. Her name is Kanoe,' said Tamamo in a clear voice. The woman named Kanoe kept her face down without saying anything.

Tamamo smiled slightly and continued, 'There, she fell in love with a man and had his child.'

'Why would her life be in danger because of that?' asked Iori.

'That man is of a rather high class. Normally, he wouldn't even be allowed to walk around Naitou-Shinjuku alone.'

'But then why?'

'At first, that man just hid from the eyes of the watchmen and walked around town for fun, but then he met her. They both fell in love.'

'If that was the case, couldn't he have just bought her out of bondage?' asked Yasohachi.

Tamamo smiled wryly and said, 'He was a man of a family that wouldn't allow that. Do you understand my meaning?'

'Who on earth is he?'

'It's better for you not to know. You won't be able to find out and remain unharmed.'

Tamamo glared at Yasohachi. The pressure from her eyes made it impossible for Yasohachi to say any more.

However, he could guess at the situation. Somebody of such a high class it was impossible to discuss him had had a child with a prostitute from Naitou-Shinjuku. If that came out, there would be an uproar.

It wasn't strange that somebody would try to have the baby killed, and that was why Kanoe and the baby had been attacked.

At first, Jiroemon, who had a grudge against Harunoya, had been used, and the people at Harunoya, who knew the situation, had become victims.

It would have been fine if Kanoe and the baby had been killed when Yuugiri was attacked, but Tamamo had stopped that and the attack had ended in failure. That was why Tenmei was used to try to kill Kanoe and the baby.

That was the rough outline of this case.

Ting –

There was the sound of a bell.

Yasohachi turned to look in fear and saw a monk standing in the darkness.

It was –

'Kanou Yuuzan.'

When Yasohachi said that, there was, once again, the sound of a bell.

'You really are troublesome. You get in the way of my work,' said Yuuzan in a clear voice.

'Why do you do things like this?' asked Yasohachi.

Yuuzan laughed. 'Because it's work.'

'Taking people's lives is your work?'

'Your point of view is narrower than I would have thought.'

'Eh?'

'This is only minor preparation for what is going to happen next in the flow of history.'

– What is he talking about?

That was what Yasohachi was thinking.

Why would burying a baby matter in the flow of history? He didn't understand at all.

'Stop the babbling.'

Ukikumo pushed Yasohachi aside and stood in front of Yuuzan.

'Your work ended in failure. Why not put an end to it already?'

Ukikumo's eyes were sharper than Yasohachi had ever seen them as he glared at Yuuzan. In his eyes was a rage that wouldn't lose to Acala.

However, Yuuzan wasn't bothered at all. His lips were even turned up in a smile.

'I would like to, but I'm in a hurry. That man shall be your opponent.'

Ting –

The bell rang for a third time.

As if that were a sign, the fallen Tenmei slowly got up.

He held the demon sword Muramasa in his hand.

'So that was your plan!'

Ukikumo quickly held up his staff, but Tenmei didn't pay him any attention. He went straight for Kanoe and the baby.

Kanou Yuuzan had shown himself to distract Ukikumo from Kanoe.

Ukikumo had given him an opportunity.

Iori went to try to block the attack with her wooden sword, but she wouldn't make it in time.

– They're going to be killed!

Yasohachi stared in shock as blood sprayed out in front of him.

The blood was – Tenmei's.

Hijikata had unsheathed his sword at the speed of lightning and cut Tenmei.

'Agh!'

Tenmei screamed as he fell to the ground, writhing.

'I didn't kill him,' said Hijikata, putting his sword away.

Yasohachi saw that Tenmei's right arm had been cut off.

Iori ran up to him and wrapped Tenmei's right arm in cotton to stop the blood.

It was true that Tenmei was alive, but without his right arm, a painter was as good as dead. In a sense, it was worse than taking his life.

However, Yasohachi couldn't blame Hijikata. That had been the only way to save Kanoe and her baby.

– Is that really true?

Doubt bloomed within Yasohachi, and the reason was clear.

The moment Hijikata had killed Tenmei, he had looked like an Asura thirsting for blood.

'Yasohachi-san, please help me take Tenmei-san to the clinic,' called out Iori. Yasohachi hurriedly went to help her carry Tenmei.

Fortunately, there was a cart nearby. Yasohachi put Tenmei in there and looked towards the alley – he saw Ukikumo's back. Ukikumo was standing perfectly still.

His gaze was on where Yuuzan should have been, but Yuuzan was gone.

'Yasohachi-san, let's hurry.'

At Iori's urging, Yasohachi pushed the cart forward quickly.

He turned around partway to see Hijikata pick up the demon sword from the ground. He was looking at it as if in a trance.

– What does he plan to do with that sword?

Yasohachi had no way of knowing what Hijikata's intentions were.

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epilogue

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Afterwards –

Yasohachi and Iori went to Koishikawa Souten's clinic.

They were here to visit Machida Tenmei.

When Yasohachi and Iori entered the room, Tenmei was sitting cross-legged on the futon and looking up blankly at the ceiling.

Tenmei had always been thin, but he looked hollowed out.

'Oh, it's you, Hachi.'

Tenmei smiled at him slightly, but that expression soon twisted in pain. Though his life was in no danger, he had lost his right arm.

The physical pain must have been unbearable, but his heart must have been in terrible pain too.

'How do you feel?' asked Yasohachi, sitting down.

There was probably a better way to put it, but that was all Yasohachi could think of.

Iori sat down after bowing silently.

Tenmei looked at the stump where his right arm used to be and smiled bitterly.

'It's just deserts,' he said.

'No, that's...' Yasohachi stopped speaking, unsure of what to say.

'You don't have to comfort me. I deserve what happened to me,' said Tenmei.

'That's not true. It was Kanou Yuuzan's plan that did it,' said Iori, shaking her head.

'Miss, please don't comfort me. It only makes me feel worse.'

'But...'

'It's because I was stupid enough to fall for Yuuzan's plan.'

'I think there was no way for you to have escaped it,' said Yasohachi, leaning forward. It wasn't just consolation. It was what he truly felt.

'Did you meet him?'

Tenmei turned hollowed eyes towards Yasohachi.

Yasohachi nodded, which made Tenmei sigh. He must have sensed that something had happened just from that. 'I really was a fool. Hachi, you met Yuuzan, but you weren't swayed.'

'That isn't true. I was almost tricked. If Iori-san, my sister and Hijikata-san hadn't been there...'

Yasohachi looked at Iori.

If he had been alone then, Yasohachi might have been the one wielding the demon sword.

'That's the difference,' Tenmei said firmly.

'What's the difference?'

'Hachi, you had people who would come to save you. I didn't. That's why...' Tenmei looked at his missing right arm sadly.

– That's not true.

Yasohachi wanted to say that, but the words wouldn't come out.

'That's a terrible expression you've got,' said Tenmei with a laugh as he looked at Yasohachi, who was looking down.

'No, I...'

'It's fine. I'll draw again. I lost an arm, but thanks to that, I think I can see differently now.'

Yasohachi didn't know if Tenmei's bright voice was what he really meant or just bravado.

'I need to apologise to you, Hachi,' said Tenmei, face turning serious after laughing for a while.

'What is it?'

Yasohachi sat up straight.

'Hachi, you have natural talent.'

'No, I...'

'Don't be humble.'

'I'm not. It's true there's no strength in my paintings...'

'I said there was no soul in your paintings before, but you don't need that.'

'Eh?'

'People have things they're good at and things they're bad at. Hachi, you don't have to paint anger and hatred – just paint paintings that will heal people's hearts.'

'All right,' said Yasohachi, nodding as he mulled over Tenmei's words.

He had been swayed by Kanou Yuuzan's words because he had wanted something he didn't have, but rather than wanting what he didn't have, he should have put to work what he did have.

He could think that way now.

Shortly after, Yasohachi and Iori took their leave.

After walking through the hallway for a bit, Iori suddenly stopped and said, 'I still lack diligence.'

'Eh?'

'I was dealt with by Kanou Yuuzan like a child and lost my confidence. I almost thought of giving up on the sword...'

'Iori-san...'

Iori hadn't been able to stand up to Kanou Yuuzan at all then.

It made sense to lose confidence after seeing such a difference in strength.

'But when I saw Tenmei-san, I changed my mind. I might still be able to do something.'

The smile on Iori's face was brilliant.

'Right,' said Yasohachi with a smile and a nod.

If Iori was still going to keep trying, Yasohachi had to continue painting too.

They left the clinic and saw Ukikumo standing in the bright summer sun.

He had a red cloth with eyes drawn on it in ink covering his own red eyes.

If Kanou Yuuzan's existence was darkness, than Ukikumo's was light. Because there was Ukikumo, there was Yuuzan. Because there was Yuuzan, there was Ukikumo – it was like they were two sides of the same coin that could never be separated.

'How was he?' asked Ukikumo.

'He's doing better than I thought.'

'I see,' Ukikumo said curtly. He put his gourd right to his mouth and gulped down rice wine.

'Um, could I ask one thing?' said Yasohachi.

Ukikumo used his kimono sleeve to wipe his mouth. 'What?'

'What happened to Kanoe-san and her baby?'

Though they managed to save them that night, that was only temporary. If the baby's existence was a problem, they would continue to be in danger.

'Don't worry about it.'

'But...'

'Tamamo hid them. They won't be easy to find.'

'I see.'

Yasohachi sighed in relief.

Perhaps he was being too optimistic, but he felt like Tamamo would be able to hide them.

Ukikumo started walking, so Yasohachi hurriedly called out to him.

'Could I ask one more thing?'

'What?'

Ukikumo seemed annoyed.

'Did Hijikata take the demon sword – Muramasa?'

Sometimes, the expression Yasohachi saw on Hijikata's face had a shadow that reminded him of Kanou Yuuzan.

The entranced expression he'd had when he took Muramasa in his hand had made Yasohachi go cold. He had even thought that Hijikata might have been swayed by the demon sword Muramasa.

'Who knows,' said Ukikumo with a sword.

'That's irresponsible...'

'You don't have to worry about it, Hachi.'

'Why not? Hijikata-san might have lost his senses after taking the demon sword too.'

'That won't happen,' Ukikumo said firmly.

'How can you say that for sure?'

'Toshizou's heart is already...'

'What is it?'

'What I'm saying is that Toshizou's heart won't be shaken by something like a demon sword,' Ukikumo said carelessly. Then, he walked away.

Yasohachi felt like he'd been tricked and he didn't like it, but it was Ukikumo. Asking any more would be useless.

Yasohachi and Iori exchanged a glance before walking after Ukikumo.

Ting –

Yasohachi felt like he heard the sound of a bell in the distance –